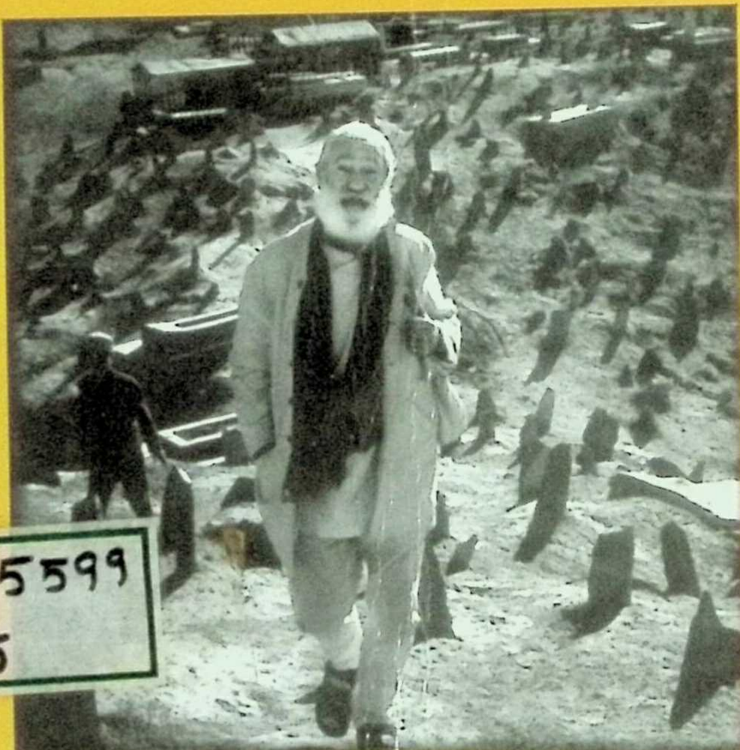
TIZIANO TERZANI

LETTERS AGAINST THE WAR



India Research Press

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TIZIANO TERZANI

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Letters against the war
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6-7

To Novalis,
my grandson,
that he may choose peace

CONTENTS

10 SEPTEMBER 2001

There are days in our lives when nothing happens, days which go by leaving nothing to remember and no trace of their passing, almost as though we hadn't lived them at all. Come to think of it, most days are like that. But when it dawns on us that the number of days we have left is limited, we wonder how we could possibly have let so many slip by unnoticed. But this is how we're made. Only afterwards do we appreciate what came before. Only when something is in the past do we understand what it would be like to have it in the present. But by then it's too late.

For me, and not just for me I am sure, 10 September 2001 was one such day. I remember nothing about it. I know I was in Orsigna, the summer was over, the family had dispersed again in all different directions and I, doubtless, was getting my clothes and papers ready for another winter in India.

I thought I'd leave after my birthday, but wasn't counting the days. That day, 10 September, went by without me noticing, as if it hadn't even been on the calendar. Such a pity. Because for me as for everyone, even those who still refuse to accept it, that day was special, a day of which we should consciously have savoured every single minute. It was the last day of our former life: the last day before 11 September, before the Twin Towers, before the new savagery, before restricted freedom and widespread intolerance, before technological warfare, before the massacre of prisoners and

innocent civilians, before the great hypocrisy, before conformism, before indifference and, worse still, mean-spirited rage and ill-judged pride. It was the day before the flight of man's fantasy towards love, fraternity, spirit and joy, was hijacked and turned towards hatred, discrimination, matter and suffering.

I know it seems as though little or nothing in our lives has changed. Our alarm clocks still go off at the same time each day, we still do the same jobs, the mobile phones still ring in the train and the newspapers still churn out their daily dose of half-truths and half-lies. But it's an illusion. The same illusion to which we fall victim in the split second between seeing an explosion in the distance and hearing it. The explosion has taken place, huge and horrendous. The noise will reach us and deafen us. It could even wipe us out. Better prepare in advance, get things ready before we have to run, even if only metaphorically, before we have to save the children or pick up one last thing to fit in a bag.

The world has changed, and so must we. We should stop pretending that all is as it was and we can go on living our normal lives in cowardly fashion. In view of what is happening in the world, our lives cannot, must not, be normal. We should be ashamed of such normality.

The feeling that everything had changed hit me right away. A friend phoned me and said: "Turn on the TV now!" When I saw the live coverage of the second aeroplane exploding, I thought: "Pearl Harbor! We've got another war on our hands here." I stayed glued to the television for hours, flicking between the BBC and CNN, then went out for a walk in the woods. I remember how amazed I was that nature should remain indifferent to what had happened. The chestnuts were beginning to ripen and the first mists were rising from the valley. As usual I could hear the distant whisper of the stream in the air and the tinkling bells of the goats of Brunalba. Nature was completely uninterested in our human dramas, as if we really didn't count for anything and could just disappear without leaving much of a gap.

Perhaps it's because I've spent my entire adult life in Asia, and because I truly believe that everything is one, that as the Taoist Yin and Yang so neatly illustrates, light contains the seed of darkness within it and at the centre of darkness is a point of light - perhaps this is why I came to think that the horror I'd just witnessed was ... an opportunity. The whole world had seen. The whole world would understand. Man would grow in awareness, arise from his slumbers and start to rethink everything: relations between states, between religions, between man and nature, even between man and man. It was a chance for us to examine our consciences. We could accept our responsibilities as Westerners and maybe at last begin to make some progress in our understanding of life.

After what I'd just seen on television and the changes now to be expected, we couldn't go on living normally as I saw the goats were doing, grazing on the grass as I returned home.

I'm sure I've never spent so much time in my entire life in front of the television as I did in the days that followed. From first thing in the morning till last thing at night. I barely slept. The word "opportunity" kept buzzing round in my head. Faced with an official truth, out of a sense of professional duty I have always attempted to see if there were some other angle to it. In every conflict I have always sought to understand the motives of both sides. In 1973, together with Jean-Claude Pomonti of *Le Monde* and the photographer Abbas, I was one of the first to cross the front line into South Vietnam and talk to the "enemy", the Vietcong. Similarly, in 1996, in an attempt to understand the terrorists who had tried to blow up one of the Twin Towers, twice in succession I managed to get into the "University of Jihad" and speak with Osama bin Laden's followers.

I thought it might help to tell this story again and recount my impressions of that visit, to try and imagine how the world looks from the point of view of a terrorist. But writing it proved hard going.

14 September was my sixty-third birthday. On that same day my lovely working relationship with *Der Spiegel* came formally to an end. I had served on their staff for exactly thirty years, but in 1997 I asked to go into a kind of hibernation. They agreed.

I said everything I had to say on the subject of journalism in my book *In Asia*, which brought together all the long or short stories to which I had been witness. Thereafter I pretty much retired from the world. I now spend a great deal of time in the Himalayas, and greatly enjoy having only natural deadlines: dusk is the time to turn in, dawn the time to get up. I live two hours by car from the nearest village, plus an hour on foot through a forest of giant rhododendrons. There is no telephone or electricity, and the only distractions are welcome ones: animals, birds, the wind and the mountains. I have lost the habit of reading newspapers, and I can happily do without them even when I come to Europe. They just repeat the same old stories, and it feels as though I'd read them years ago when they were written better.

The most beautiful season in the Himalayas, in my opinion, is the winter. The sky is wonderfully clear and the mountains seem so close. I'd made firm plans to leave, but as the Indians say pointing up at the sky: "Do you want to make Baghawan (God) laugh? Very well: tell him your plans".

So I spent my birthday writing, not an article with a fixed number of lines and an attention-grabbing first sentence, but a letter written off-the-cuff, as if to a friend.

I like writing letters. I've always thought that if I'd been born rich three hundred years ago in Florence, where instead I was born poor, I'd have liked to do nothing but travel the world writing letters. Journalism has enabled me to do something similar, but always with limitations of space, deadlines to worry about and a particular style to adhere to. Now at last I'm free to just write letters.

I emailed the one from Orsigna to Ferruccio de Bortoli, editor of *Corriere della Sera*, together with a message which said something along the lines of: "You decide; as per our

agreement".

For years I'd had a contract with the *Corriere*, but when it came up for renewal I chose to do nothing about it, for the same reason I've never wanted advances on books before I've written them. I don't want to feel obligations of any kind, to feel guilty or duty-bound to do anything. So de Bortoli and I resorted to a kind of one-off gentlemen's agreement. I would feel free to write whenever, as much and however I wanted. He would feel free to publish it or not, changing no more than the odd comma. And that's how it was.

The letter appeared on 16 September. The title wasn't the one I'd suggested, "An opportunity", but I had no complaints, then or afterwards. It began on page one, and took up the whole of another page. The gist of all I wanted to say was there: the terrorists' motives, the Muslim world's dramatic confrontation with modernity, the role of Islam as an anti-globalization ideology, the need for the West to avoid a war of religion, and a possible way out: non-violence.

The touch-paper had been lit. I finished packing my clothes and papers and went off to Florence, ready to leave. I wasn't really sure about going to the Himalayas. Going back to my marvellous retreat seemed like a luxury I could no longer afford. Bush had only just said: "We shall smoke Osama bin Laden out of his cave." I had to accept that Osama had driven me out of my lair.

For a while I'd been feeling the temptation to return to the world, to "go down to the valley" as they say in the Himalayas when they go shopping. My book *A Fortune-Teller Told Me* had come out in America in July, and the publisher had invited me to go through the horrible process of "flogging" it. In other words, I had to become a parcel in the hands of some extremely capable and efficient young PR men, the kind who take charge of you and move you round from morning till night, by car, by aeroplane or helicopter, from coast to coast, from one city to another, sometimes more than once a day. They sit you in front of an interviewer

from a daily newspaper, who'll have read no more of the book than its cover. Then they put you before the microphones of a radio station for cab drivers, then another for insomniacs, then in front of the TV cameras of some major show or some humbler early-morning programme for housewives, where destiny is discussed between recipes for chicken salad and new types of water-skis. I did this for a fortnight, and my God was it worth it! I came back from that tour in a state of shock, with a frightful impression. I had seen an America that was arrogant, obtuse, completely turned in on itself, full of its own power and wealth, with a complete lack of interest in or understanding of the rest of the world. I'd been struck by their pervading sense of superiority, their conviction of being powerful and unique, and their belief that theirs was the definitive civilization – all without a hint of self-irony.

One night, after a presentation of the book at the Smithsonian Institute, an elderly American journalist I've known for many years took me for a stroll among some of monuments in the heart of Washington: the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial, which is particularly moving, the Korean War Veterans' Memorial, which is dramatic and evocative, and the site where a Second World War Veterans' Memorial is due to be built.

The first thing that occurred to me was how strange it was for a young country whose founding principle was the pursuit of happiness to have all these monuments to death at the heart of its capital city. My friend replied that this had never occurred to him. When we came to the elephantine, whiter-than-white statue of Abraham Lincoln seated on a great white armchair in a huge white copy of a Greek temple, I found myself saying, "This reminds me of Kim Il Sung", aware that my friend too had been in North Korea.

He was offended, as if I'd blasphemed against something sacred. "We love this man", he said. I refrained from pointing out that a North Korean would have said exactly the same thing, but it was America itself that had given me this impression. The comparison lay not just in the elephantine

size of the monument, but also in the fact that the Americans too struck me as having undergone some kind of brainwashing, whereby everyone says the same things and thinks the same way. The difference is that, unlike the North Koreans, the Americans think they are acting freely and don't realize their conformity is the product of everything they see, drink, hear and eat.

America had frightened me. I'd thought of going back, taking several months to travel the whole country as I'd done with my wife Angela while studying at Columbia University, on the kind of journey European journalists used to make rather than being stuck in front of a computer in New York as they are now, seeing and reading what America wants them to see and read in order for them to repeat it.

The ticket for Delhi was already in my pocket when the same friend as before called me.

"Have you read her?"

"Who?"

"Oriana Fallaci. She's replied to you, in this morning's *Corriere*."

It was 3 p.m. on 29 September, and I had to go round half Florence before I could get a copy. The newspaper had sold like nobody's business.

A great sadness came over me as I read the four broadsheet pages. Once again I'd been wrong. Opportunity? Some hope. 11 September had proved to be no more than a chance to rouse and stir the beast which hides in all of us. The thrust of Oriana's reply was not to deny the "enemy's" motives but his very humanity, which is precisely how all wars become inhuman.

This struck me. Everyone has the right to face old age and death in their own way, but I was grieved to find that she had chosen the way of rancour, grudge and resentment, the way of the less noble passions and the violence that ensues from them. I was truly sorry for her, because I'm

more and more sure that violence brutalizes not just its victims but also those who perpetrate it.

I sat down to write. This time the letter would be addressed to Oriana herself. It appeared in the *Corriere* on 8 October, the day when newspapers were dominated by photographs of Bush and Osama bin Laden. America had begun bombing Afghanistan. I managed to find a copy of the newspaper at Florence Airport. It was dawn and I was leaving for Paris. From there I would be flying to Delhi and then on to Pakistan.

I had decided to "go down to the valley". I was paying out of my own pocket, so I was free not to write if I chose. It was a weight off my mind not to have to "represent" anyone but myself, and to be able write "retired" in the space on the immigration forms under "profession".

These are the letters I wrote in the course of that long journey. The dates show when and where they were composed. Only half of what follows appeared in the *Corriere*, but I want to make clear that de Bortoli faithfully published every single word of every letter I sent him. I'm grateful to him for this, as I'm sure are many readers, even if at times, especially after an American missile hit the building of the independent television station Al Jazeera in Kabul, I feared another might land with similar intent on the *Corriere*'s headquarters in Via Solferino in Milan.

Obviously de Bortoli and I do not share the same views on everything. For instance, he concluded his 12 September editorial with the famous phrase "We are all Americans", which many have subsequently borrowed. Well, not me. Ultimately I feel Florentine, a bit Italian and increasingly European. But certainly not American, even if I owe America a lot, including the lives of my son and my grandson, both of whom were born there, and in part my own. That, however, is another story.

Basically I have difficulty in defining myself. I've reached this age in life without ever wanting to belong to anything, not a church, nor a religion. I've never belonged to any

political party, and never put down my name for any association, be it a pro-hunting or a pro-animal rights group. Not because I'm not by nature on the side of the birds and against the hunters who hide in huts to shoot them, but because I find any kind of organization restrictive. I need to feel free. Such freedom is awkward, because it means every time a situation arises where I'm forced to decide what to think and do, all I have to fall back on is my own head and heart rather than the easy, ready-made line of some party or the words of some sacred text.

I've always instinctively avoided power, and have never cultivated those who wield it. Powerful people have always left me cold. If I ever got into some control-room it was always with a notebook at the ready, on the lookout for glitches. I'm not saying this in order to boast. I'm saying it to reassure those who might be tempted to think, as they read the pages that follow, that I'm part of some cabal or conspiracy, that I have an agenda or am seeking to advance someone else's.

With these letters I'm not trying to convince anyone. I'm just trying to let another voice speak, tell another side of the story, begin a debate so we can all be aware, so no-one can continue to claim nothing has happened, so no-one can pretend they don't know that right this minute thousands of people in Afghanistan are living in terror of being bombed by B-52s, or that some prisoner is being flown, hooded and handcuffed, twenty hours from his homeland to a far-flung corner of American colonial territory in Guantanamo, Cuba to be 'interrogated', while our anti-terror coalition strategists plan some further attack on goodness knows what other country in the world.

So I say: let's stop for a minute, think, be aware. Let's each of us do something, and as Jovanotti says in his poetic song against violence which has reached even these mountains, 'let's save ourselves'.

No-one else can do it for us.

In the Indian Himalayas, January 2002

LETTER FROM ORSIGNA

An opportunity

Orsigna, 14 September 2001

The world is no longer the one we knew. Our lives have changed for good. Maybe this is the opportunity to start thinking differently from how we've done till now, the chance to reinvent the future for ourselves and not just retread the same old path that's brought us to today and could lead us to annihilation tomorrow. Never has the survival of man been so much at stake.

Nothing is more dangerous in a war, and war it is that we are heading for, than to underestimate one's enemy, to be unfamiliar with his ways of thinking, to deny every one of his motives and label him "mad". Islamic *jihad*, the clandestine international network currently headed up by sheikh Osama bin Laden, which in all probability lay behind the appalling attack-cum-challenge on the United States, is anything but an instance of madness. If we want to find a way out of the chasm of terror into which we feel we have been thrown, we must try to understand who we are dealing with and why.

No Western journalist has ever managed to spend much time with Bin Laden or observe him at close quarters, but several have succeeded in approaching and listening to his associates. In 1995 I had the chance to spend two half-days in one of the training camps he was financing on the

border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. I left feeling dismayed and alarmed. All the time I was with the hard, smiling mullahs and the many young men with their cold, contemptuous stares, I felt plague-ridden, the bearer of a disease with which I'd never before felt infected. In their eyes this disease was simply my being a Westerner, a representative of a decadent, materialistic, exploitative civilization which was insensitive to the universal values of Islam.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the demise of communism, I experienced first-hand the truth that this fundamentalist, militant version of Islam was the only ideology still intent on opposing the US-led New Order which was promising peace and prosperity to a globalized world. I first understood this while travelling in the Muslim republics of the former Soviet Central Asia,* and felt it just as keenly when I met some anti-Indian guerrillas in Kashmir. I interviewed one of their spiritual leaders, who gave me my first copy of the Koran when he bid me farewell "so I might learn something from it".

The youngsters I'd seen in that training camp, all different nationalities but with one single firm faith, came back to my mind as, stunned like everyone else, I watched again and again the pictures of the aeroplanes crashing and wreaking havoc in the heart of New York, just as they had in the days leading up to it when I'd read the stories of Palestinian suicide-bombers blowing themselves up on the streets of Israel, reaping victim after victim. They were from a different planet, these boys, a different century, people who believe as we ourselves once used to but no longer do, and who think sacrificing one's own life in a just cause is holy. They were made of a stuff we would find it hard to imagine. They were indoctrinated, accustomed to the most spartan of lives marked by a strict routine of exercise, study and prayer, highly disciplined, with no sex before marriage,

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* I wrote about this in *Goodnight, Mister Lenin: A Journey through the End of the Soviet Empire* (Picador 1993).

no alcohol and no drugs.

War is not a profession for Bin Laden and his people. It's a mission. Its roots lie in the faith they acquired in the closed-minded Koranic schools, and above all in their deep feelings of defeat and impotence, in the humiliation of a civilization, Islam, which was once great and feared but which now increasingly finds itself marginalized and offended by the overwhelming power and arrogance of the West.

It's a problem which various other civilizations have had to face in the course of the last two centuries. It's the same humiliation the Chinese felt at the hands of the English "red beards" who imposed the opium trade on them. The Japanese felt it too when the "black ships" of U.S. Admiral Perry wanted to open up their country to trade. Their initial reaction was one of bewilderment. How could their civilization, which had for so long been superior to that of the foreign invaders, now find itself powerless and under the cosh? The first solution the Chinese sought was a return to tradition, in the shape of the Boxer rebellion. When that failed, they set out on the path of modernization, first Soviet-style then Western-style. Meanwhile, the Japanese had made this transition in one leap before the end of the nineteenth century, slavishly imitating all that was Western, copying the uniforms of European armies and the architecture of our railway stations, even learning to dance the waltz.

In the course of the last century the Muslims also had to address the problem of how to survive and maintain their own identity when faced with the West. Their responses likewise swung between resorting to tradition on the one hand, as in the Yemen or with the Wahhabis, and varying degrees of westernization on the other. The boldest and most radical of these was initiated by Kemal Atatürk, who rewrote Turkey's constitution in the 1920s, removed the veil from women and exchanged Islamic law for a copy of the Swiss civil and Italian penal codes. He thus set his country on a path which today is leading Istanbul towards membership

of the European Community, albeit not without the odd hiccup.

The westernization of the Islamic world is anathema to the fundamentalists, and now more than ever this process threatens its very soul. According to the Muslims, the West began to show its hand once the Cold War ended, and its diabolical agenda of bringing all mankind under one global system is becoming clearer and clearer. Technology has helped the West to have access to and control of the entire world's resources, including those which the Creator, in their view deliberately, placed in the lands where Islam was born and spread, from the oil of the Middle East to the timber of the Indonesian forests.

It's only in the last ten years that this phenomenon of globalization, or rather Americanization, has fully emerged. And it was in 1991 that Bin Laden, hitherto an American *protégé* (his first job in Afghanistan had been to build the CIA's great underground bunkers to stock weapons destined for the *mujahideen*) first rebelled against Washington. The stationing of American troops in his country, Saudi Arabia, during and after the Gulf War, was to him an intolerable affront and a violation of Islam's holy places. He made his position clear in his first declaration of war on the United States in 1996: "The walls of oppression and humiliation can only be broken down by a hail of bullets". Nobody took him very seriously. The manifesto which his organization Al Qaeda published in 1998 after a meeting of various affiliated groups was even more explicit: "For seven years the United States has been occupying the lands of Islam in the Arabian peninsula, plundering our riches, imposing its will on our statesmen, terrorizing our neighbours and using its military bases in the peninsula to fight against Muslim peoples". He appealed to all Muslims to "confront, fight and kill" the Americans. His declared objective is the liberation of the Middle East, but the unstated mission of which he dreams in the name of a heroic past could be something far bigger.

The first blows of the *jihad* were unleashed on American embassies in Africa, and caused dozens of deaths. Washington's response was to bomb Bin Laden's bases in Afghanistan and a pharmaceutical factory in Sudan, causing hundreds, some say thousands, of civilian casualties (the exact number was never known because the United States blocked a United Nations enquiry into the incident).

Bin Laden's counter-response has now made itself felt in New York and Washington. Unable to fire at the pilots of B-52s who drop their bombs from beyond his range, or to strike at the sailors who launch their missiles from ships offshore, his answer was to devise a terrorist attack on masses of defenceless civilians. What these men have done is atrocious, but it is not gratuitous. These are acts of war, and for a long time now war has not been a chivalrous affair. All the participants in the last global conflict bombed defenceless civilians, from the German V2s over London to the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki which produced a death toll of over 200,000, all of them civilians.

Unofficial wars have been fought with new means and new methods for quite some time now, far from the eyes of the world which has been tricked into believing it can see and understand everything simply because it could watch the Twin Towers collapse live on television.

The United States has been bombing Middle Eastern countries such as the Lebanon, Libya, Iran and Iraq since 1983, and the post-Gulf War US-imposed sanctions against Saddam Hussein's Iraq have left about half a million dead since 1991, according to American estimates. Many of these are children, victims of malnutrition. Fifty thousand deaths a year are a steady trickle which understandably generates in Iraq, and everyone identifying with it, the same kind of anger that the New York massacre generated in America and then Europe. It's important to understand that there's a link between these two expressions of anger. To do so is not to confuse the executioner with the victim, rather to realize that if we want to understand the world we live in, we must see it whole, not just from our own point of view.

We cannot understand what is happening if we only listen to what the politicians tell us. They're constrained to repeat rhetorical formulae and conditioned to react in the time-honoured manner to a situation which is completely new. They're incapable of an imaginative response, such as suggesting that this might finally be the moment to make peace rather than wage war, starting with the Israelis and Palestinians. No: there will be war.

An odd coalition is currently being formed via the mechanism of treaties such as NATO, which were entered into for one set of reasons but which are now being exploited for another. Countries such as China, Russia and maybe even India are getting involved, each goaded on by its own narrowly nationalist interests. For China, the global war against terrorism is a golden opportunity to try and resolve its age-old problems with the Islamic inhabitants of its border territories. For Putin's Russia, it's above all a chance to solve the problem of Chechnya and silence the charges it faces for its appalling record of human rights violations in that country. The same applies to India and its perennial struggle for control of Kashmir.

The problem is that it will prove extremely difficult to pass these hostilities off as merely a campaign against terrorism and not a war against Islam. Curiously enough, the coalition which is now being formed bears more than a passing resemblance to the two-fronted one Islam had to fight many centuries ago, with the Crusaders to the west and the nomadic tribes of Central Asia and the Mongols to the east. Then the Muslims held firm, and ended up converting a good number of their enemies.

Bin Laden and his associates may have made such a gamble today. Maybe they are counting on exactly this kind of reprisal from the Western world to mobilize massive Islamic resistance, and turn what is still a minority, albeit a determined one, into a more widespread phenomenon. Islam's simplicity and its fundamentally militant nature ideally lend it to being the ideology of the earth's wretches, the poverty-stricken masses who fill the Westernized Third

World, desperate and discriminated against.

Rather than remove the terrorists and those who have supported them (perhaps we'll be surprised to find out just how many are involved, including some we'd never have suspected), it'd be wiser to remove the causes that drive such people, especially the young, into the ranks of the *jihad* and make murder and suicide seem like a mission. If we truly believe in the sanctity of human life, we must acknowledge the sanctity of all human lives. Or are we ready to accept the hundreds and thousands of casualties, even civilian and unarmed, who'll be the victims of our reprisals? Or will our consciences be salved if, in the public relations jargon of the American military, these are passed off as "collateral damage"?

The kind of future which awaits us depends on what we do now, on how we react to this horrible provocation and how we see this moment in our history on the scale of the history of mankind. The problem is that we'll never be on the right path so long as we continue to believe we have a monopoly on what is good, so long as we continue to consider our civilization as *the* civilization and take no notice of others.

Islam is a great and unsettling religion, one which like many a faith has its own tradition of atrocities and crimes. But it's absurd to think that some cowboy can wipe it off the face of the earth, even if he is armed with all the pistols under the sun. Rather than stirring their fundamentalist fringes into becoming even more virulent, it would be better to help the Muslims isolate these fringes on their own and encourage them to rediscover the more spiritual side to their faith.

Nowhere is untouched by Islam these days. Even in America there are six million Muslims, as many as there are Jews. It's no coincidence that most of them are Afro-Americans, lured by the fact that since its inception Islam has transcended the concept of race. There are already 1,400 mosques on U.S. territory, even one at the Naval Training Centre in Norfolk, Virginia.

We mustn't allow ourselves to be borne along by partial visions of reality, or to become hostage to the kind of rhetoric now being used by those who are short on ideas to help fill the silence caused by dismay. As if those tragic, vile hijackings were not enough, the danger is that we ourselves as human beings will end up being hijacked away from our true mission on earth. The Americans describe this in their constitution as "the pursuit of happiness". Fine, but let's all pursue this happiness together, once we have redefined it in terms which are more than material and once we Westerners are fully persuaded that we can't pursue our own happiness at the expense of others, and that happiness is as indivisible as freedom.

The carnage in New York has given us a chance to rethink everything. It's presented us with new choices, the most pressing of which is whether to add to Islamic fundamentalism's reasons for existence or try and remove some of them, whether to transform the dance of Palestinians from macabre outbursts of joy at someone else's tragedy into expressions of relief at regaining their dignity. Otherwise every bomb or missile that falls on populations outside our own world will simply end up sowing more dragons' teeth and spurring more youngsters to shout "Allah Akbar", "Allah is great", as they pilot another aeroplane full of innocents into a skyscraper, or the day after that leave a briefcase with a chemical or nuclear bomb inside it in one of our supermarkets.

Only if we manage to see the universe as a single entity, in which every part reflects the whole and whose great beauty lies precisely in its variety, will we be able to understand exactly who and where we are. Otherwise we'll be like the frog at the bottom of the well in the Chinese proverb, who looked up and thought what he saw was the sky. Two and a half thousand years ago an Indian, subsequently thought of as enlightened, made an obvious point: "Hatred generates hatred", he said, and "war can only be fought with love". Few bothered to listen to him. Perhaps now is the time.

LETTER FROM FLORENCE

The Sultan and St Francis

Florence, 4 October 2001

Oriana,

From the windows of a house not far from the one where you too were born, I look out on the austere, elegant blades of the cypress trees silhouetted against the sky. I think of you in New York, as you look out of your windows at the panorama of skyscrapers from which the Twin Towers are now missing. I recall going for a long walk with you one afternoon many, many years ago, along the little roads through the olive-trees which give our hills their silvery colour. I was starting out on my career, a novice in the profession where you were already a giant. I remember you suggested we exchange "letters from two different worlds", me from China, where I had gone to live in the immediate aftermath of the Mao era, you from America. It was my fault it never happened. But I've taken the liberty of writing to you now, in response to the offer you so generously made back then and certainly not to engage you in a correspondence which both of us would rather avoid. I can honestly say, I've never felt as keenly as I do now that though you and I share the same planet, actually we live in two different worlds.

I'm also writing, publicly, for those of your readers who, perhaps like me, were almost as stunned by your outburst as they were by the collapse of the Towers. I'm writing to let

them know they're not alone. Thousands of people perished in those Towers, and with them our sense of security. What seemed to die in your words is reason, the noblest part of the human mind, and compassion, the noblest sentiment of the human heart.

Your outburst struck me, and it wounded me. It made me think of Karl Kraus. "Let him who has something to say come forward and be silent", he wrote, in despair at the fact that the unspeakable horrors of the First World War had loosened rather than stilled people's tongues, causing them to fill the air with a confused, absurd babble. For Kraus, to be silent meant to pause for breath, to look for the right words, to think before speaking. He used this conscious silence to write *The Last Days of Mankind*, a work which even today seems disturbingly topical.

You have every right to think and write what you do, Oriana. But the problem is, your fame ensures your brilliant lesson in intolerance is now making its way into schools and influencing our children. That upsets me.

These are extraordinarily important days. The unspeakable horror has hardly begun, but we still have time to stop it and turn it into a chance to rethink things on a large scale. It's also a time of enormous responsibilities. Impassioned words from loosened tongues merely awaken our basest instincts. They rouse the beast of hatred which lies dormant in us all. They provoke the kind of blind emotions which render every crime conceivable, which make us, like our enemies, entertain the possibility of suicide and murder.

"To conquer the subtle passions seems to me to be harder by far than physical conquest of the world by the force of arms", wrote the noble-minded Gandhi in 1925. He went on: "So long as man does not of his own free will put himself last among his fellow creatures, there is no salvation for him".

You, Oriana, have put yourself in the highest place in this crusade against everyone who is not like you and everyone you dislike. Do you really believe you're offering

us salvation? There's no salvation in your burning anger, just as there's no salvation in the calculated military campaign called "Enduring Freedom" to make it more acceptable. Or do you really think that violence is the best way to defeat violence? No war has ever put an end to war, and nor will this one.

Something new is happening to us. The world is changing around us. We too must change our way of thinking and the way we relate to the world. It's an opportunity. Let's not waste it. Let's throw everything open to discussion and imagine a different future for ourselves from the one we thought we'd have before 11 September. Above all, let's not give in to anything as if it were inevitable, least of all to war as an instrument of justice or pure revenge.

All wars are dreadful. The modern tendency to refine the techniques of destruction and death simply makes them more so. Think about it. If we're prepared to fight this war using every weapon at our disposal including the atomic bomb, as the American Secretary of Defence has been suggesting, then we must expect our enemies, whoever they are, to be even more determined than they were before to do exactly the same, to disregard the rules and ignore every principle. If we respond to the attack on the Twin Towers with even more terrible violence, first in Afghanistan, then Iraq, then who knows where, this too will be met with violence which is worse still, then we will be forced to retaliate once again, and so on and so forth.

Why not just call a halt to it all now? We've lost all measure of who we are. We've forgotten how fragile and interconnected the world we live in is. We've deceived ourselves into thinking that a dose of violence, if applied "intelligently", can put an end to the dreadful violence of others. We should think again. We should ask those of us who possess nuclear, chemical and biological weapons, chief among whom is the United States, to give their solemn pledge that they will never be first to use them, rather than ominously reminding us of their existence. Now this really would be ground-breaking. Not only would it give those who

make such a pledge an advantage in moral terms, which in itself could prove to be a handy weapon in the future, but it might also be just enough to defuse the unspeakable horror which has been set in motion by this chain reaction of vengeance.

In the past few days I've rediscovered a lovely book by an old friend of mine, which came out in Germany a couple of years ago. It's called *Die Kunst, nicht regiert zu werden: ethische Politik von Sokrates bis Mozart*, "The Art of not being Governed: Ethical Politics from Socrates to Mozart", and it's by Ekkehart Krippendorff, who taught in Bologna for years before returning to the University of Berlin. Krippendorff's fascinating thesis is that politics in its noblest form arises from the need to transcend revenge. Western culture, according to this view, has its deepest roots in certain myths, such as the story of Cain and Abel or the Erinyes, which have always served to remind man of his need to break out of the vicious cycle of revenge if civilization is to be established. For instance, Cain murders his brother but God forbids man to avenge Abel's death. Instead, he marks Cain with a sign, which also serves as a form of protection, and condemns him to exile where he founds the first city.* Vengeance thus belongs to God, not man.

According to Krippendorff, theatre, from Aeschylus to Shakespeare, has had a crucial role in shaping Western man. Putting all the characters in a conflict on stage, with their different points of view, their second thoughts and their possible choices of action, encourages the audience to reflect on the significance of the passions, and on the futility of violence which can never achieve its aim.

Sadly, the only protagonists and spectators on the world stage today are us Westerners. Through our television and newspapers we hear only our own reasons and experience, only our own sorrow. The world of others is never represented.

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* Kabul, according to an Afghan legend.

The kamikaze might not interest you, Oriana, but I'm very interested in them. I spent days in Sri Lanka with some young Tamil Tigers who had made vows to suicide. I'm interested in the young Palestinian Hamas who blow themselves up in Israeli pizzerias. Perhaps even you would have felt a moment's compassion if you'd visited the centre where the first kamikaze were trained at Chiran on the island of Kyushu in Japan, and read the tragic, poetic words they wrote in secret before setting out, reluctantly, to die for flag and Emperor.

The kamikaze interest me because I'd like to understand what makes them so willing to commit an act as unnatural as suicide, and perhaps even find out what could stop them from doing so. Those of us who are fortunate enough to have children without having to write posthumous letters to them are deeply concerned today at the thought of seeing them burn in the fire of this new, rampant kind of violence, of which the massacre of the Twin Towers may be no more than one episode. It is not a question of justifying or condoning but of understanding, because I'm convinced that the problem of terrorism will not be resolved by killing terrorists, but by eliminating the causes that make people become such.

Nothing in human history is simple to explain, and there's rarely a direct, precise correlation between one event and another. Even in our own lives, every event is the product of thousands of causes, which work together with that event to produce thousands of other effects, which in turn cause thousands more. The attack on the Twin Towers was one such event, the consequence of countless previous complex events. It's certainly not the act of "a war of religion" perpetrated by Muslim extremists to conquer our souls, a crusade in reverse as you call it, Oriana. Nor is it "an attack on freedom and western democracy", as the simplistic formula used by politicians would have it.

An elderly academic at Berkeley University, a man whom no-one would suspect of anti-Americanism or leftist sympathies, has given a completely different interpretation

of the event. "The suicidal assassins of September 11 2001 did not 'attack America', as our political leaders and news media like to maintain; they attacked American foreign policy," writes Chalmers Johnson in the October issue of *The Nation*. For Johnson, the author of several books, the latest of which, *Blowback*, was published last year and has an almost prophetic quality, it represents the umpteenth "blowback", deriving from the fact that the United States has managed to maintain its imperial network of some 800 military installations around the world despite the end of the Cold War and the break-up of the Soviet Union.

In an analysis which during the Cold War years would have seemed like a product of KGB disinformation, Johnson lists all the dirty tricks, conspiracies, coups, persecutions, murders and intervention in favour of corrupt dictatorial regimes in which the United States has overtly or covertly been involved in Latin America, Africa and Asia, including the Middle East, from the end of the Second World War to the present day.

He claims that the attack on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon is a "blowback" forming part of a whole series of such events, which started with the CIA's operation to overthrow the government of Mossadegh in Iran and install the Shah in power in 1953, and goes right up to the Gulf War, and the permanent stationing of American troops in the Arabian peninsula, especially Saudi Arabia, the home of Islam's holy places. According to Johnson, this policy "helped convince many capable people throughout the Islamic world that the United States was an implacable enemy". This explains the virulent anti-Americanism which has spread throughout the Muslim world and today so surprises the United States and its allies.

However precise or imprecise Chalmers Johnson's analysis may be, it's clear that the main reason for all our and America's problems in the Middle East, apart from the Israeli-Palestinian question, is the West's obsessive concern to ensure the region's oil reserves remain in the hands of regimes which are "friendly", whatever else they may be.

This is a trap, and now we've got an opportunity to escape from it.

Why not review our economic dependence on oil? Why not look closely at every alternative potential source of energy, as we could have done at any point in the past twenty years?

We could thus have avoided getting involved with regimes in the Gulf which are no less repressive or odious than the Taliban. We could thus also avoid the increasingly disastrous "blowbacks" which the opponents of such regimes will unleash on us. At the very least, we could help to maintain a better ecological balance on the planet. We could even save Alaska, which just a couple of months ago was opened up to drilling by President Bush himself, whose political roots, as we all know, are in the oil business.

And while we are on the subject of oil, Oriana, I'm sure you too will have noted how, with everything that's being written and said about Afghanistan in these days, hardly anyone has mentioned that much of the interest in that country is due to the fact that any pipeline carrying the immense resources of natural gas and oil from Central Asia, i.e. those countries which used to be Soviet republics and have now all become United States allies, to Pakistan, India and then on to the countries of South-East Asia, has to pass through it if it is to avoid going via Iran. No-one in these days has mentioned the fact that as recently as 1997, two delegations from the horrible Taliban were received to discuss this matter in the Department of State in Washington, and that Unocal, a large American oil company advised by Henry Kissinger no less, signed an agreement with Turkmenistan to build a pipeline through Afghanistan.

Behind all the speeches stressing the need to protect freedom and democracy, the imminent attack on Afghanistan may thus conceal another less high-sounding but no less significant motive.

For this reason some American intellectuals have begun to express concern that the combined interests of the oil

and arms industries, a combination which is very well represented in the administration which currently runs Washington, should decide that American foreign policy will operate in one way only, and in the name of counter-terrorist emergency regulations restrict those extraordinary freedoms which make life there so special.

The fact that an American television journalist was reprimanded from the White House pulpit for wondering if Bush's use of the adjective "cowardly" was appropriate to describe the suicidal terrorists, along with the fact that certain programmes have been censured and certain correspondents deemed heterodox and removed from their newspapers, has obviously done nothing to dispel such anxieties.

Dividing the world into "those who are with us and those who are against us" in a way which strikes me as being typically Taliban, clearly creates the necessary conditions for the kind of witch-hunts that America suffered in the 1950s under McCarthy, when so many intellectuals, academics and state officials were unjustly accused of being communists or sympathizers, and were persecuted, tried, and very often left jobless.

The tirade you spat out against the people you call "cicadas" and "intellectuals of doubt" goes in much the same direction, Oriana. Doubt is an essential function of thought. It's the basis of our culture. To try and remove doubt from our heads is like trying to remove air from our lungs. I make no claim whatsoever to have clear, precise answers to the world's problems, which is why I'm not a politician. But I do think it's useful for me to be allowed to have doubts about other people's answers, and to ask honest questions concerning them. It shouldn't be a crime to speak of peace in times of war such as these.

Unfortunately, there's been a desperate clamour for orthodoxy even here in Italy, not least in the "official" world of politics and the media. It's as if we were already frightened of America. We may switch on the television and hear a

post-communist, holding an important office in his party, inform us that Private Ryan is an important symbol of America, the country which twice came to our rescue. But did that same politician not also take part in marches against American involvement in Vietnam?

I realize this is a very difficult time for the politicians. I understand them, and I particularly appreciate the difficulties of someone such as our own Prime Minister who, having chosen the path of power as a shortcut to solving his little conflict of earthly interests, now finds himself caught up in a huge conflict where the interests are all divine, a war of civilization being fought in the name of God and Allah. No, I don't envy the politicians.

We're very lucky, Oriana. We have precious little to decide, and not actually being in the river ourselves, can enjoy the privilege of standing on the bank and watching the current flow. But with privilege comes responsibility, and one responsibility we bear is the far from easy task of getting behind the truth to try to "construct fields of coexistence rather than fields of battle", as Edward Said, a Palestinian professor now at Columbia University, wrote in an essay on the role of the intellectual which appeared just a week before the massacres in America.

Part of our trade involves simplifying what is complicated. But we can't exaggerate by presenting Arafat as the quintessence of duplicity and terrorism and accusing our Muslim immigrant communities of being incubators of terrorists. From now on your arguments are going to be used in schools to counteract the kind of position which makes a virtue out of goodness, as exemplified by Edmondo De Amicis's *Cuore*. But do you really believe the Italians of tomorrow will be any the better for being nurtured on this kind of intolerant over-simplification?

Wouldn't it be better to spend a moment looking at Islam in religious education classes, or study Rumi or Omar Khayyam, whom you despise, in literature lessons? Wouldn't it be better for at least a handful to study Arabic, alongside

the many who already study English and even Japanese?

Did you know that there are only two officials who speak Arabic in the Italian Foreign Ministry, even though Italy looks directly onto the Mediterranean basin and onto the Muslim world? Or that, as is the way of things here, one of them is currently consul in Adelaide, Australia?

A phrase of Toynbee's keeps going round in my mind: "The works of artists and writers live longer than the deeds of soldiers, statesmen and businessmen. Poets and philosophers go further than historians. But the saints and prophets are worth more than the rest put together".

Where are the saints and prophets today? We could certainly do with at least one! We need a St Francis. There were crusades in his day, too, but he was concerned with the others, the ones the crusaders were fighting against. He did all he could to go and find them. The first time he tried, the ship he was sailing on was wrecked, and he only just survived. He tried again, but fell ill on the way and had to turn back. Then, in the siege of Damietta in Egypt during the fifth crusade, embittered by the crusaders' behaviour ("he saw evil and sin"), but deeply moved by the sight of the dead on the battlefield, he finally crossed the front line. He was taken prisoner, chained and brought before the Sultan. It's a shame CNN didn't exist in 1219, because it would have been fascinating to see this meeting on television. It must have been remarkable, because after a conversation which doubtless lasted deep into the night, the Sultan allowed St Francis to return unharmed to the crusaders' encampment the next morning.

I like to imagine each putting his viewpoint to the other, St Francis speaking of Christ, the Sultan reading passages from the Koran, and them ultimately agreeing with each other on the message that the poor friar of Assisi repeated wherever he went: "Love your neighbour as yourself". I also like to imagine there was no aggression between them, given that the friar knew how to laugh as well as preach, and that they parted on good terms in the knowledge that they

couldn't stop the course of history anyway.

But today, not to stop history might mean bringing it to an end. Do you remember Father Balducci, Oriana, who used to preach in Florence when we were young? Referring to the horror of the atomic holocaust, he asked a very pertinent question: "Has man become any more human because of the end-of-the-world syndrome, because of the choice between being and not being?". Looking around, I think the answer must be "no". But we can't give up hope.

"Tell me, what is it that drives man to war?" Albert Einstein asked Sigmund Freud in a letter in 1932. "Is it possible to channel the psychic evolution of man in such a way that he may become better able to resist the psychosis of hate and destruction?"

Freud took two months to reply. He concluded that there were grounds for hope. Two factors would help put an end to war in the short term, he believed: a more civil attitude, and the justified fear of the effects a war in the future might have.

Death spared Freud the horrors of the Second World War just in time, but not Einstein, who became more and more convinced of the need for pacifism. Shortly before his death in 1955, he made a final appeal to humanity for its survival from the little house in Princeton where he had taken shelter: "Remember your humanity, and forget the rest".

It isn't necessary to attack in order to defend, Oriana (I'm referring to your spitting and kicking). One doesn't have to kill in order to defend oneself, though there may be justifiable exceptions. In the *Jataka*, the stories of Buddha's previous lives, I've always liked the one where even he, the epitome of non-violence, commits a murder in a previous incarnation. He's on a boat with five hundred other passengers when, already endowed with the gift of second sight, he "sees" that one of them, a bandit, is about to kill and rob the others. He prevents him from doing so by throwing him into the water. The bandit is drowned and

the rest are saved.

To be against the death penalty doesn't mean being against penalties as such or in favour of criminal liberties. But in order to punish justly we must respect certain rules, rules which are the product of a civilized society. The reasons for punishment must be convincing, and above all there must be proof. The leaders of Nazi Germany were brought to trial in Nuremberg, and the Japanese leaders responsible for all the atrocities committed in Asia, in Tokyo. All of them were duly hanged. The evidence against each of the defendants was overwhelming. But Osama bin Laden?

"While talks are on for the extradition of CEOs, can India put in a side request for Warren Anderson of the US? ... We have collated the necessary evidence. It's all in the files. Could we have him, please?" Arundhati Roy, author of *The God of Small Things*, put this question to the Americans from India a few days ago, clearly in order to provoke. Like you, Oriana, she's famous and controversial, loved and hated. Always ready to kick up a fuss, like you, she used the worldwide debate on Osama bin Laden to demand that the American chairman of Union Carbide, responsible for the explosion in a chemical factory in Bhopal which killed 16,000 people in 1984, be tried in an Indian court. Is he too a terrorist? Very possibly, from the point of view of those who were killed.

The terrorist who has now been singled out as the "enemy" to be defeated is the Saudi billionaire who orders the attack on the Twin Towers from his lair in the mountains of Afghanistan. He's the engineer-pilot and fanatical Muslim who kills himself and thousands of innocent people in the name of Allah. He's the Palestinian boy who carries a bag full of dynamite and blows himself to smithereens in the middle of a crowd.

Yet we must accept that for others, the "terrorist" may be the businessman who arrives in a poor Third World country, not with a bomb in his briefcase but plans for a chemical factory, which could never have been built in a

wealthy First World country because of the risks of explosion and pollution. And what about the nuclear power station which gives cancer to the people living nearby, or the dam which makes thousands of families homeless? Or even the construction of hosts of little factories, which concrete over ancient ricefields in order to produce transistor radios or trainers, until such time as it is cheaper to take production elsewhere and the factories are closed, leaving the workers unemployed and bereft of the fields in which they could have grown rice, and the people to die of starvation?

This isn't relativism. I'm merely saying that terrorism, understood as a way of using violence, can express itself in different ways including economic, and that it will be hard to agree on a common definition of the enemy to be defeated.

The governments of the West are today united in backing the United States. They claim to know exactly who the terrorists are and how they are to be fought, but the people of the countries themselves seem less convinced. So far there have been no mass demonstrations for peace in Europe, but there is a widespread sense of unease, as widespread as the confusion over what should take the place of war. "Give us something nicer than capitalism", said a placard carried by a demonstrator in Germany. "Un mondo giusto non è mai NATO", "A fair world has never been born", said a banner carried by some young people marching in Bologna a few days ago (playing on the Italian word "nato", "born"). True enough. A "fairer" world is perhaps what we'd all like, now more than ever. A world in which those who have plenty look out for those who have nothing. A world which is governed by principles of lawfulness, and based on just a little more morality.

The enormous, composite alliance which Washington is putting together, overturning former coalitions and reconciling countries and individuals which previously had been at loggerheads simply because it's now in their interests, is just another example of that political cynicism which currently feeds terrorism in certain parts of the world

and discourages so many fine people in our own countries.

The United States has recently tried to get the United Nations involved too, in order to have the greatest possible backing and give its war against terrorism a veneer of international legality. Yet no country has been more reluctant than the U.S. to pay its dues to the institution housed in the glass palace. It still hasn't signed the International Court of Justice statute or the treaty for banning anti-personnel mines, let alone the Kyoto Treaty on climate change.

American national interests take precedence over all other considerations. For this reason Washington has now rediscovered the usefulness of Pakistan, a country previously to be kept at a distance because of its military regime, and punished with economic sanctions for its experiments with the nuclear bomb. For this reason, too, the CIA will again soon be authorized to hire *mafiosi* and gangsters, to whom it will entrust the dirty job of liquidating the people it has put on its blacklist here and there around the globe.

And yet one day politics will have to join hands again with ethics if we want to live in a world which is better, better in Asia as in Africa, better in Timbuktu as in Florence.

And while we're on the subject of Florence, Oriana, I too am hurt and saddened by it every time I'm here, as I am now. Everything's changed, everything's been cheapened. But Islam isn't to blame, nor are the immigrants who've taken root here. They aren't the ones who've made this into a city of shopkeepers that's sold itself to tourism. The same has happened everywhere. Florence was beautiful when it was smaller and poorer. Now it's hideous, but not because Muslims hang around Piazza del Duomo, because the Filipinos meet in Piazza Santa Maria Novella on Fridays and the Albanians congregate in front of the station every day. It's hideous because it too has been globalized, because it's failed to stand firm against the march of those market forces which till yesterday seemed irresistible.

In the space of two years, Via Tornabuoni, a lovely old

street in the centre of Florence where I've enjoyed going for a stroll ever since I was a boy, has lost an historic bookshop, an old café, a traditional chemist's and a music shop. And what has taken their place? Lots and lots of fashion shops. Believe me, Oriana, I don't feel at home here any more either.

Which is why I too have retreated, to a kind of chalet in the Indian Himalayas, looking out on the most divine mountains in the world. I spend hours alone, just looking at them in their majesty and stillness, a symbol of the utmost stability. Yet they too, like everything in the universe, reveal their diversity and impermanence with the passing of the hours. Nature is a great teacher, Oriana, and every now and then one has to return to her and sit at her feet. You too, Oriana. Boxed up in an apartment which is boxed up in a skyscraper, looking out on other skyscrapers full of boxed up people, you'll end up feeling truly alone. You'll feel your existence is an accident rather than part of a whole which is greater, far greater, than all the skyscrapers which stand before you and even those which are no longer there. Look at a blade of grass in the wind and imagine you're like it. Even your anger will pass.

I bid you farewell, Oriana, and hope with all my heart that you find peace. Because if there's no peace within us, there won't be peace anywhere else either.

LETTER FROM PESHAWAR

In the story-tellers' bazaar

Peshawar, 27 October 2001

I came to this border town to be closer to the war, to try to see it with my own eyes and get my head round it. But it's like jumping into a bowl of soup to see if it's salty, only to find yourself drowning. I feel I'm sinking in a sea of human madness, which with this war seems to know no end. The days pass, but I can't shake off this sense of anguish. Anguish caused by knowing what is about to happen but being powerless to prevent it. Anguish caused by being a representative of the world's most modern, richest, most sophisticated civilization, which is currently bombing the world's poorest and most primitive country. Anguish caused by belonging to the fattest, fullest race on earth, which is currently adding to the burden of desperation already crippling the planet's thinnest, hungriest people. There is something immoral and sacrilegious about all this, but also, in my opinion, something stupid.

The world situation has grown tenser and more explosive in the three weeks since the Americans and British started bombing Afghanistan. Relationships between the Israelis and Palestinians are in flames, those between India and Pakistan are on the point of breakdown. The entire Islamic world is agitated, and each of its moderate states, from Egypt to Uzbekistan, even Pakistan itself, is coming under increasing pressure from fundamentalist groups. Despite

all the footage of missiles, bombs and top-secret commando operations the Pentagon trots out to persuade us this war is just a video-game, the Taliban are still firmly ensconced in power, support for them within Afghanistan is growing, and in every other corner of the world our sense of security is dwindling.

"Are you a Muslim?", a young man asks me when I drop into the bazaar to eat some unleavened bread. "No." "What are you doing here then? We're going to kill you all soon." Everyone around us laughs. I smile too.

They call it Kissa Qani, the story-tellers' bazaar. Twenty years ago it was still one of the last romantic crossroads in Asia, with the widest variety of goods and the widest variety of people. Now it's as a kind of gas chamber, where the air is unbreathable because of the exhaust fumes. The people look increasingly the worse for wear too, because of all the masses of refugees and beggars. One of the old stories they used to tell was about a Neapolitan mercenary called Avitabile, who arrived here with a friend from Modena in the mid-nineteenth century and ended up becoming city governor. To keep things in hand, he had a couple of thieves hanged from the tallest minaret of the mosque before breakfast each morning. Since then the children of Peshawar have been told: "Be good or I'll hand you over to Avitabile". Today the stories you hear at the bazaar are all about the American war.

Some of these stories, like the one about the attacks on New York and Washington being the work of the Tel Aviv secret service, which explains why no Israelis went to work in the Twin Towers on 11 September, and the one about the anthrax in the mail being a CIA operation designed to prepare the American public for an imminent attack on Saddam Hussein, are already out of date. But they still continue to do the rounds, and, what is more, people still believe them. The most recent is that the Americans have realized their bombs will never be able to defeat the Afghans, so they've decided to drop sackfuls of dollars instead. "Each missile costs two million dollars. They've already fired over

a hundred. Just think: if they had given us all that money, the Taliban would no longer be in power", said an old Afghan refugee, an ex-commander of a group of anti-Soviet *mujahideen* who came and sat next to me.

The idea that the Americans are rolling in money and ready to be generous to anyone who sides with them is widespread. A few days ago, several hundred religious and tribal leaders of the exiled Afghan community met in a large amphitheatre in central Peshawar to discuss the future of Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban. For hours on end these handsome gentlemen with long beards, ideal material for close-ups on Western television, came to the microphone to speak of peace and unity, but there was no passion or conviction in their words. "They're here just to register their names and try to get their hands on American money", said an old friend of mine, a Pakistani intellectual of Pashtun descent. "Everyone looks at each other and asks: 'How much have you had so far?' The Americans are forgetting an old proverb of ours, which says that an Afghan may be hired but never bought."

For the Americans, the Peshawar meeting was the first major step towards what looked on paper like the ideal political solution to the Afghan problem: bringing King Muhammad Zahir Shah back to Kabul, where he would install a government in which everyone was represented, even some Taliban moderates, then getting the new regime's army to hunt down the al-Qaeda men and spare the coalition troops all the trouble and risk of getting involved. But solutions on paper don't always work on the ground, especially when that ground is Afghanistan.

The idea that, after a thirty-year exile in Rome, the old king should now play a part in the country's future, is the kind of illusion to which those who try to solve the world's problems round a table are prone, the kind of demand made by diplomats who never leave the comfort of their air-conditioned offices. You only have to go and talk to the people to realize that the old king enjoys none of the prestige which Western diplomats, especially the Italians, accord

him. The fact that he appeared in public or visited a refugee camp is taken as a sign of indifference towards the sufferings of his people. "All he had to do was have his photograph taken with a rifle in his hands and fire a shot in the air at the time of the Soviet invasion, and they would respect him today", said my friend. "And he's never made a pilgrimage to Mecca, which would have given him a bit of religious clout in the current climate."

Apart from the old king, the other man the Americans were counting on in their game was Abdul Haq, one of the most respected commanders in the anti-Soviet resistance who kept clear of the subsequent civil war. "He's not here. He's gone to Afghanistan", people said during the Peshawar conference, alluding to a mission which was supposed to be decisive. The idea was clearly that Abdul Haq would use his prestige and huge influence over so many of the old *mujahideen*, who had thrown their lot in with the Taliban, to prise some regional commanders away from the regime of Mullah Omar. Then he would lead the Pashtun detachments in a march on Kabul, once it had been taken by the Northern Alliance, whom the Pashtuns and Pakistanis had no wish to see in power.

Abdul Haq's mission was short-lived. The Taliban were on to him from the moment he entered Afghanistan. Within a matter of days they captured him, and in the space of a few hours had executed him as a traitor, along with two of his followers. Despite all their electronic equipment and super-helicopters, the Americans were unable to save him.

The assumption behind all this American manoeuvring for a political solution was that the Taliban would crumble, and that pressure from the bombings would create a power vacuum. None of this has happened. On the contrary, every indication suggests the Taliban are still in office. They capture Western journalists who venture beyond the frontier, and to discourage any similar attempts make known that they have neither space nor food to accommodate others. "The investigations are underway. Everyone will be judged according to the *sharia* or Koranic law", they say,

just like any other sovereign state might. The Taliban pass decrees, issue press releases refuting false information, and continue to challenge American might, giving no ground and promising death to any Afghans who side with the enemy.

The fact that the Taliban are now being attacked by foreigners means that even those who had little or no sympathy with their regime are now siding with them. "When one melon sees another melon it takes on the same colour", the Pashtuns say. Faced with foreigners who are once again being seen as invaders, the Afghans look increasingly to be of the same hue.

The Americans were already under enormous international pressure because of the stupidity of their smart bombs, which continue to fall on defenceless people and once again have hit Red Cross supplies. In these first three weeks, the aerial war has proved to be a complete failure, the political war an insult. The Americans began the Afghan campaign saying they wanted Osama bin Laden "dead or alive". Soon that became wanting to capture or kill the Taliban leader Mullah Omar, in the hope that this would undermine the regime. But all they have managed to do so far, apart from causing hundreds of civilian casualties, is to terrorize the urban population whose cities had already been reduced to rubble. The United Nations estimate that the bombs have caused three quarters of the inhabitants of Kandahar, Kabul and Jalalabad to flee. This means that at least a million and a half people are now homeless, reduced to wandering about in the mountains, in addition to the six million who, again according to the United Nations, were at risk for lack of food and shelter even before 11 September.

"These are the innocent people we have to think about," says an international official, "people who don't have anything to do with terrorism, who don't read the newspapers or watch CNN. Many of them don't even know what happened to the Twin Towers."

What they do know, however, is the bombs, the bombs which wreak havoc day and night, which kill and shake the

ground as if in a perpetual earthquake, the bombs dropped from silver aeroplanes pirouetting in the bright blue Afghan sky, the bombs which are British and American. It is this which forms the Pashtuns', the Afghans' and in general the Muslims' hatred of foreigners. This hostility is more and more apparent on peoples' faces as time goes on.

I had gone to the bazaar because I wanted to see how many people would join the pro-Taliban demonstration which regularly follows noonday prayers in old Peshawar. However, my Pashtun friend informed me that the number of demonstrators no longer meant anything. "The really serious ones don't march, they sign up. Go to the villages instead", he told me.

So I did. For a day and a night, in the company of two university students who seemed to know everyone and everything in that region, I got to see a world whose distance from ours is not to be measured in terms of miles but in terms of centuries, a world we must understand thoroughly if we want to avoid the catastrophe we now face.

The region I went to is two hours by car from Peshawar, half way to the Afghan-Pakistani border. The locals do not recognize this border, not even as the brainwave of some British official more than a hundred years ago. The same people live in the same mountains on either side of this unnatural division. They are the Pashtuns, also known as Pathans. They are in the majority in Afghanistan and the minority in Pakistan. They are Pashtuns first, Afghans or Pakistanis second, and their dream of a Pashtunstan, a state comprising all Pashtuns, has never completely waned. The Pashtuns are the most feared warriors in Afghanistan. It is they whom the British were unable to defeat. "A Pashtun loves his rifle more than his own son", they used to say. The Taliban are Pashtun, and Pashtun, almost without exception, are the regions where the American bombs now fall. "My father has been a liberal and a moderate all his life, but since the raids he too has been speaking like a Taliban. He says there is no alternative to *jihad*", one of my students said as we were leaving Peshawar.

The road ran through sugar cane plantations. Large, freshly-painted slogans were daubed on the walls dividing up the fields. "*Jihad* is the duty of the nation." "A friend of the Americans is a traitor." "*Jihad* will endure until the Day of Judgement." Strangest of all was the one which said: "The Prophet has ordered *jihad* against India and America". No-one questions whether or not India and America actually existed 1,400 years ago at the time of the Prophet. But it is this blinding mixture of ignorance and faith which is so explosive and which, with its highly simplistic and fundamentalist version of Islam, creates that devotion to war and death which we have perhaps rather too recklessly decided to take on.

"When one of our people is blown up by a mine or torn apart by a bomb, we pick up the pieces, the scraps of flesh and the broken bones, place them in a turban cloth and bury the bundle in the earth. We know how to die. But the Americans? The British? Do they know how to die?" From the far end of the room another bearded man, remembering where I said I was from when I introduced myself, opens an Urdu newspaper and reads aloud a short news item saying that Italy too has offered to send ships and soldiers. At which point my interlocutor makes his challenge more personal. "And you Italians? Are you ready to die like that? Have you too come here to kill our people and destroy our mosques? What would you say if we came and destroyed your churches, if we flattened your Vatican?"

We're in a sort of very basic village surgery six or seven miles from the Afghan border. On the dusty shelves there are some dusty medicines. On the wall there's a green and black flag with a sun in the middle on which is written the word "*jihad*". Some ten young men have gathered around the "doctor". Some are war veterans, others just off to fight. One has recently come back from the front and tells us about the raids. He says the Americans are cowards because they shoot from the sky and flee, and won't fight face to face. He says that Pakistan prevents refugees from entering the country and that many civilians wounded in the raids

on Jalalabad are now dying on the other side of the border for want of the most basic treatment.

The atmosphere is tense. Here, even more than in the bazaar, everyone is utterly convinced that the West is engaged in a conspiratorial crusade to destroy Islam, that Afghanistan is only the first target and that the only way to fight back is for the whole Islamic world to respond to the appeal for a holy war. "Let the Americans come. Let them. Then we'll be able to get some decent quality shoes off the corpses", one of the young men says. "War is very expensive for you, but it costs us nothing. You will never defeat Islam."

I try to explain that the war in progress is against terrorism not Islam. I try telling them that the target of the international coalition led by America is not the Afghan people but Osama bin Laden and the Taliban who shelter him. None of them are convinced. "I don't know who Osama is", says the doctor. "I've never met him, but if Osama came about because of the injustices in Palestine and Iraq, you'd better believe that those now being committed in Afghanistan will produce many, many more Osamas".

I need no convincing on this point, and the proof lies here before my eyes. This surgery is a recruitment centre for the *jihad*, and the doctor is heading up a group of twenty young men who will set out for Afghanistan tomorrow. Each will carry with him a weapon, some food and some money. There are groups like this in every village. The doctor talks of several thousand *mujahideen* who are ready to leave this region, technically in Pakistan, in order to fight alongside the Taliban. Training? All of them have had two months' instruction in how to use weapons and guerrilla warfare techniques, the doctor says. But what really counts is the religious instruction they have received in the *madrassas*, the countless little Koranic schools scattered all over the countryside. They took me to see one. It was heart-rending.

Some fifty boys and a handful of girls aged between three and ten, all pale, emaciated and wasting away, were sitting on the ground in front of little wooden tables,

incessantly chanting verses from the Koran. In their own language? No, in Arabic, which none of them understand. "But what they do understand is that if they learn the entire Koran off by heart they will go to Paradise, and their families with them up to seven generations!" This is what the young man who was their teacher explained to me. He was thirty-five years old, married with five children and had a heart problem. His brother was head of the local mosque. He said that despite his poor health he too would soon be off to fight. He was only waiting for the Americans to come down from their planes and start fighting on the ground. "If they don't stop bombing, we'll form little teams of men who'll place bombs and plant the flag of Islam on American soil. If they're captured by the FBI, they'll commit suicide", he declared, smiling like a man possessed.

The *madrassas* teach little or nothing apart from memorizing the Koran. But this education, pitiful though it may be, is the only one available to the poor families of the region. What they produce is the young men heading off now to join the *jihad*.

Wherever we stopped in those hours, I heard speeches full of fanaticism, superstition and certainties based on ignorance. And yet as I listened to these people, I wondered to what extent we too, however learned and well-informed we may be, are not also primed with what we think is knowledge, and do not also end up believing the lies we tell each other.

Seven weeks since the attacks on America, the promised evidence to show that Osama Bin Laden and (indirectly) the Taliban were to blame for the events of 11 September has still not materialized, but their guilt is now taken for granted. We too are taken in by words. We too believed the aim of the US special force's first operation in Afghanistan really was to find the Taliban's command centre, without stopping to think that, as my friend put it, "there is no such centre, or at most there may be a mud hut with a prayer mat and a few carrier pigeons, now the Taliban can't use their radios for fear their conversations will be

intercepted by the Americans".

Is the fanaticism of these fundamentalists not like our own arrogant belief that we have a solution for everything? Is their blind faith in Allah any different from our blind faith in science and technology, in our ability to exploit nature for our own purposes?

It is with certainties such as these that we are now heading off to fight in Afghanistan, employing the most sophisticated means, the most invisible aeroplanes, the longest-range missiles and the most lethal bombs, to avenge an act of war committed by someone who was armed only with a paper knife and an unflinching determination to die.

How can we fail to realize that in order to combat terrorism we've been reduced to killing innocent people, rousing in so doing a beast which used to lie dormant? How can we not see that we've taken a step in the wrong direction, that we've put our foot into quicksands, and that if we keep on going like this we'll just get further and further away from being able to escape?

After talking to the fanatical *jihadi* I spent the rest of the night talking to myself, sleeplessly trying to keep the mosquitoes at bay. Certainly, a society which, produces young men as narrow-minded and willing to die as this has little to recommend it. But is our own society any better? And what about America, a society which, alongside the heroic firemen of Manhattan, is capable of producing the Oklahoma City bomber, the people who attack abortion clinics and maybe even – the suspicions are growing – those who put anthrax into envelopes and send it to half the world?

The society I had just been observing was charged with hatred. But is ours any less so, now that out of revenge, or maybe just to get our hands on the natural resources of Central Asia, we're bombing a country which twenty years of war have already reduced to an enormous ruin? Is it conceivable that in order to protect our own way of life, we have to create millions of refugees and bring death to women and children? Can some definitions expert please tell me

the difference between the innocence of a child killed in the World Trade Centre and that of one killed by our bombs in Kabul?

The truth of the matter is that the children in New York are our children, those in Kabul, like the other 100,000 Afghan children who according to UNICEF will die this winter if supplies do not arrive immediately, their children. And their children no longer interest us. We can't watch a little Afghan urchin waiting for a loaf of bread on television every evening at dinner-time. We've seen it too many times before. It no longer grabs our imagination. We've got used to this war, too. It's no longer newsworthy. The newspapers are recalling their correspondents, the television stations shedding staff and cutting their satellite links from the roofs of five-star hotels in Islamabad. The circus is moving elsewhere, on the lookout for new stories. This war has received too much attention already.

And yet Afghanistan will continue to haunt us, for it is the litmus test of our own immorality, our claims to civilization, our inability to understand that violence can only generate violence and that only a force for peace not the force of arms will be able to solve the problems we face.

"Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed", runs the opening paragraph of the UNESCO constitution. Why not try to find a solution within us which isn't the brutal and banal one of more bombs and more deaths? We've acquired such great knowledge, but know so little about our own minds and even less about our consciences, I said to myself as I tried to ward off the mosquitoes.

Mercifully the night is short. At five o' clock, a metallic voice from a loudspeaker starts intoning from the top of a nearby minaret. Others respond in the distance. We depart.

The television is already on in the hotel foyer when I get back for breakfast. The first item of news at dawn is no

longer the Afghan war, but the fact that Washington has announced "the largest arms contract in the history of the world". The Pentagon has ordered a new generation of highly sophisticated fighter planes from Lockheed Martin, three thousand of them at a cost of two hundred billion dollars. They will be ready in 2012.

To bomb whom? I wonder. Then I think of the little boys in the *madrassa* who will be exactly twenty in 2012, and I remember something the mad doctor said: "If the Americans want to fight us for four years, we're ready. If they want to fight us for forty years, we're ready. If they want to fight us for four hundred years, we're ready".

And are we ready? This really is the moment to appreciate the fact that history repeats itself, and every time it does the price gets higher.

LETTER FROM QUETTA

The Talib with the computer

Quetta, 14 November 2001

I'm writing these lines from a modest inn overlooking the great city bazaar, where a medieval crowd of bearded, turbaned men, enveloped in the modern, bluish haze of exhaust fumes emanating from buses and scooters, mingles with donkeys, horses, wagons and carts. The Afghan border is a hundred kilometres away, and this city, which squats in a basin ringed with pointed, barren, pink-grey mountains, is one of the beaches on which the waves of war are breaking, leaving the usual shipwrecked human débris behind them: the refugees, orphans, wounded and beggars.

You can't even go for a walk without being accosted by bony, begging hands or the vacant stares of women from behind their *burqas*. I managed to find a room here because the American "tourist" who had been occupying it left for Afghanistan one morning and never came back. The first version of his disappearance was that the Taliban had arrested and hanged him as a CIA agent. The second was that he had been killed in a shooting clash. All the Taliban said was that the corpse was in the hospital in Kandahar, and anyone who wanted could take it away with them. No-one did, and the landlord re-let the room. He says the American wanted to be addressed as "Major", spoke a couple of local languages and flashed his bundles of dollars at everyone. Who knows who he really was and what became

of him? It's become impossible to distinguish the facts from fiction, even in a story as minor as this.

Ah yes, the facts. I've spent my whole life running after them, convinced that if I found demonstrable, incontrovertible facts I would also find some kind of truth. Now aged sixty-three, faced with this war which has only just begun and with an unsettling premonition of what is soon to follow, I'm beginning to think the facts are just a front and that the truth they mask is at best like a Russian doll: as soon as you open it up you find a smaller one inside, then another which is even smaller, then another and another, till finally all you are left with is something the size of a grain.

We've been beguiled by the details of so many different facts that we're increasingly losing sight of the whole. What use is it to be kept informed hour by hour of the fall of Mazar-i-Sharif or Kabul if these are presented as victories, and we fail to realize our humanity is suffering some terrible defeats, notably our having resorted to war as a way to resolve conflict and rejected non-violence as the greatest sign of strength?

It's an old saying that the first casualty in any war is the truth. In this one it didn't even get as far as being born. Spies, informers, braggarts and stirrers are now swarming all over the place, particularly in a frontier town such as this. But even their role has been marginalized. Those who really count in this war of lies are the spin-doctors, the communications experts and the public relations people. They are the ones who obscure the fundamental pointlessness of this war and prevent world opinion, particularly in Europe, from taking up a stance which is moral, let alone creative. A group of these scientists-cum-illusionists has just arrived from Washington and settled into Islamabad to "manage" the hundreds of foreign journalists who are now in Pakistan. A super-expert from the inner circle, who until yesterday worked at the White House, has set himself up in 10 Downing Street to assist Tony Blair in his role as advocate for the Americans, as if it

were Blair who is U.S. Secretary of State, not Colin Powell.

The truth of this war seems to be so unspeakable that it continually has to be packaged, "managed" and made the subject of some clever marketing campaign. But this is what our world has become. Advertising has taken the place of literature, and slogans now strike us more than any line of poetry. The only way to resist is by stubbornly choosing to think with our own minds and above all feel with our own hearts.

A fortnight ago I left Peshawar and set off to travel through Pakistan in the company of the two medical students I'd met by chance. The idea was to take the political temperature of this "land of the pure" (which is what the word "Pakistan" means). The country was created after the British Empire's partitioning of India in 1947, in order to give the Muslims their own homeland. Now it's on the front line in a conflict where one of the many things at stake is its own survival. My idea was to have a close look at the effects of the war in Afghanistan, which the Americans continue to say is "just the first phase", in order to see what might happen to the rest of the world – our world, everybody's world – when it spreads, as doubtless it will, to Iraq, Somalia, Sudan, maybe Syria, the Lebanon, then who knows where. There are terrorists sheltering in over sixty countries according to Washington, and whoever fails to co-operate with the United States in flushing them out will be treated as hostile.

Is it possible that so few European voices have been raised against the almost suicidal rigidity of the American position? Is it possible that Europe has become this war's second major casualty after the truth?

On our journey we decided to steer clear of all that was official, to avoid the trap of following set routes prepared for the spin-doctors and the luxury hotels being used by the international press with their daily briefings, press releases and opinions of ex-ministers and retired generals. Instead, we decided to follow the logic of the only thread still capable of weaving the odd moment of genuine magic:

chance. Thus I went from one chance encounter to another. With the help of my students I travelled hundreds of miles, from one corner of the country to another. I spoke to dozens of people. I was present at the largest gathering of Muslims in the world apart from the pilgrimage to Mecca, and eventually provoked an order for our arrest from the Home Secretary for Baluchistan, who sent his commandos to come and flush us out of the small town of Chaman on the Afghanistan border where we had vainly hoped to spend the night unobserved.

It all began in a tea-shop in that fascinating centre of old Peshawar which is still the story-tellers' bazaar. Seated next to us on a dusty, threadbare mat was a man of about thirty, with an extremely bushy beard and a strangely gentle but steady gaze. He was drinking *kawa*, an infusion of unfermented leaves, out of a little enamel pot which was black with dirt and dents. We looked at each other, struck up a conversation, and the afternoon slipped by in a trace with the other regulars all gathered round us, hanging on our every word. I don't know if everything Abu Hanifah told me was true, but to judge from a series of checks I carried out with the help of my students, I think it must have been. He told me he was born thirty-five or thirty-seven years ago in the province of Ghazni in Afghanistan. He said that he was in charge of two hundred and fifty Taliban, that he fought in Kashmir against the Indian Army, that he had been recalled to Afghanistan once the bombings had started, and that he had arrived the night before in Pakistan with a small group of his men for a mission. I asked him everything anyone could wish to know about the Taliban, and his replies were swift, precise and politically well-informed, just like those of a Chinese or Vietcong political commissar used to be.

He said they weren't scared of bombs or missiles (the shells of the Cruise missiles were already being used to build minarets), that the war would only really begin once the American troops had hit the ground, and that the Taliban would never be completely wiped out of Afghanistan because "to be a Talib means to have studied in a *madrassa*, and

there's someone like me in every single family in the country". He said that not even the death of the current Taliban leader Mullah Omar would change things. The *shura* or supreme council of sages was made up of a thousand Mullah Omars, and any of them could take his place. He said that every city and village had its own local organization representing the *shura*, and that this would remain in force and continue to constitute the true authority for the people even when the Taliban were forced to concede territory to the enemy in order to regroup and attack them later on. Perhaps he was misguided, but he seemed utterly convinced.

The impression I had of this man was not that of an ignorant fanatic imbued with superstition like the young *jihadi* I had met in the villages outside Peshawar, who truly believed that miraculous hands would appear in the sky at just the right moment to prevent the American bombs from falling. Their minds were closed and predisposed by indoctrination to hatred. His wasn't. He knew the Americans had formidable weapons, but said that ultimately the most powerful weapon of all was faith. He was thoughtful, well-informed about world affairs and generally aware. More than a soldier, he struck me as being like a monk in some fighting order, as perhaps our Knights Templar were once upon a time.

I asked Abu Hanifah how he could come and go in Pakistan, a country which previously had had such close links with the Taliban but which now had allied itself with the United States against them. How could he, now the enemy in the war against terrorism, openly take tea with me in a Pakistani city? He laughed, as did those around us. This is the reality. Despite the official about-turn and General Musharraf's dramatic pro-Washington stance, deep down Pakistan remains profoundly ambivalent in its attitude to the war. The government in Islamabad knows that the Pashtuns believe they are one nation, whether they live in Pakistan or Afghanistan. To antagonize them would mean risking a civil war along a two thousand kilometre border. That risk will grow if Afghanistan ends up being divided

into two, with the Northern Alliance controlling Kabul and the North (which in any case are not inhabited by Pashtuns) and the Pashtun Taliban controlling the South.

Despite the recent purges ordered by Washington, Pakistan's entire state apparatus, especially its armed forces and secret services are, as Islamabad well knows, full of elements linked by a double thread to the Taliban. They gave birth to the Taliban, they helped them come of age, and they share with them a common ideology and religious faith. It's certainly no coincidence that a fire destroyed every file on the Taliban and their leaders' histories, along with maps of their positions and caves, on the very night General Musharraf announced, under pressure from America, that he'd sacked his head of secret services. If the Americans had got hold of those documents, the hunt for Osama bin Laden and Mullah Omar would have been much, much easier.

Besides, Musharraf knows the American war in Afghanistan has created strong sympathy for the Taliban, and that the myth of Bin Laden, "hero of the oppressed poor" and "symbol of the Muslim revolt against the arrogance of the infidel superpower" is gaining ground with the masses. He knows that this could turn things against him at any moment. The fundamentalists have already described him as a *kaffir*, an infidel, one who "eats American dollars".

The mere fact that Bin Laden has challenged the United States is enough to make him a hero in the eyes of the people. Wherever I have been this fortnight, I have seen posters of him at the newstands, his face on the backs of buses and trishaws, in the windows of private cars and plastered on the carts of itinerant ice-cream sellers. You can buy tapes of his speeches in every bazaar. I've heard expressions of anti-American hatred which just a few months ago would have been inconceivable, even among the well-heeled Pakistani bourgeoisie, the kind of people who send their children to study in America, who have economic links with the United States and support President Musharraf because "he had little choice with Bush's pistol

pointed at his head". "Now there's a little Osama in all of us", an elegant, bejewelled lady from Lahore high society explained to me without a hint of irony at a dinner one night.

It was Abu Hanifah who caused me to go to Lahore. He explained to me that his mission in Pakistan was to take part in the annual gathering of the *tablighi jamal*. So I followed him. It was staggering. More than a million and a half men (not a single woman as far as I could see) had come from all over Pakistan and various parts of the outside world to a valley called Raiwind about thirty kilometres from Lahore to gather in the shade of enormous white canvas tents. Together, in a constant cloud of yellow dust thrown up by the wind, they prayed five times a day, listened to the speeches of the elders, and reaffirmed the amazing bond of Muslim brotherhood which we Westerners find hard to understand, prone as we are to think increasingly in terms of "mine" rather than "ours".

The *tablighi* are a curious, disciplined, powerful organization. They are Islamic missionaries who technically are devoted not to the converson of infidels, but to the spiritual reformation of Muslims who have "fallen under the influence of Western materialism". Each member of the organization gives four months in a year free of charge to working with this mission. In small groups, without reading the papers or watching television for fear of being distracted, they travel all over the country, stay in the most remote villages and re-instruct the people in the "original ways of Allah". Through this work they've created an extensive network of contacts, and now wield enormous influence not just in Pakistan, but also in various other parts of the world where they are represented. Their secret is to stay out of the limelight. The *tablighi* don't seek publicity. They don't want to be written about. They don't allow themselves to be photographed or filmed, and their leaders don't grant interviews.

The *tablighi* claim to stand for non-violence, and say they don't want to get involved in politics. For this reason they are not to be confused with the extreme Islamic party

fundamentalists, who are demonstrating against the government and openly supporting Osama and the Taliban here. And yet after spending hours and hours in that immense, disciplined congregation of men, all of whom were wearing white caps or turbans and reeling off their prayers, it struck me that there was an obvious convergence of interests, an implicit solidarity between the *tablighi*, Osama and the Taliban. This needs to be understood properly, because by extension it involves every single Muslim in every part of the world.

Osama's objective is first and foremost political. He wants to liberate Islam's holy places from the presence of the infidels and the reigning dynasty, which he has called corrupt. In other words, he would like to seize power in Saudi Arabia. His secondary objective is to lead that country, whose inhabitants are popularly referred to in Pakistan as "sex and alcohol", back to a purer and more spiritual form of Islam. And because he sees the Americans as protectors of the existing Saudi regime and corruptors of the Islamic world in general, he has declared his *jihad*.

The *tablighi* have little or nothing to do with the political side of all this, but they do have a great deal to do with the religious side. They too want to return to a more spiritual Islam, and in this they are fundamentally sympathetic to Osama and the Taliban. But there is more to it than that. Like many other elements in the Muslim world which are not necessarily fanatical or extremist, the *tablighi* also have a more general, existential aspiration which is simply to live a life which is different to ours, to live according to other principles and remain outside the international mechanisms which they see as being dominated by exclusively Western laws and values.

In the course of the conversations I've had in Pakistan over this past fortnight with many Muslims of all different kinds, I've noted people continually referring to a particular type of violence they feel they are victims of. The cause? Confrontation with the West. Rightly or wrongly, many see globalization as an instrument of our atheistic and

materialistic civilization, which through market expansion is growing ever richer and more powerful at the expense of their world. Not without a certain paranoia, even the most cultivated Muslims in this country see every Western move, including the award of the Nobel Prize for literature to V.S. Naipaul, as an attack on Islam.

Hence their defensive reaction, and retreat into Islam as a form of refuge. Religion becomes the ideological weapon against modernity, which is seen as a form of Westernization. For this reason even moderates such as the *tablighi*, who do not want to be *jihadi*, end up sympathizing with the Taliban and Osama against the West.

This is the problem we face. It can't be solved by bombs, nor by going round the world overturning regimes we don't like and replacing them with old exiled kings or coalitions of convenience stitched together in some far away capital. Osama may be turfed out of Afghanistan, the Taliban routed and reduced to hiding out in mountains and stirring up guerrilla warfare, but the basic problem remains. Bombs only make it worse.

It may seem odd to us, but there's an astonishing number of people in the world today who don't aspire to be like us, who don't pursue our dreams or share our expectations or desires. A sixty-year-old cloth trader I met at an assembly of *tablighi* missionaries put it quite simply: "We don't want to be like you. We don't want to watch your television or your films. We don't want your freedom. We want our society to be governed by the *sharia*, the Koranic law. We don't want our economy to be ruled by the law of profit. When I have sold enough to meet my needs at the end of a day, I send my next customer off to buy from my neighbour, who I see has sold nothing". I looked around. What if all that huge gathering of men – they said there were a million and a half on the last day – what if they all felt the same way?

I was curious. I'd lost sight of Abu Hanifah in the crowd, and asked the cloth trader if I could come and visit him at his home. He gave me his address. He was from Chaman, a

small town on the border exactly halfway between Quetta, capital of Baluchistan in Pakistan, and Kandahar, the spiritual home of Mullah Omar in Afghanistan. Chaman is practically closed to foreigners. The only way of getting there is in a convoy with a police escort and a special permit issued in Quetta. This is how I ended up at this inn.

I went for a first stroll to get my bearings, and discovered I was near the city hospital where civilians wounded in the American raids on Kandahar arrived daily. It was here that I got to know "Abdul Wasey, 10 years old, Afghan, hit by a Cruise missile, fractured leg", as the handwritten notice hanging on the peeling wall behind his dirty, dusty bed said. He was very pale, and thin as a rake. Dangling from the end of his bed was a brick tied with a rope to his heel to prevent him from moving his plastered leg. The other leg, all skin and bone, was like a broomstick. Abdul had been playing cricket with friends in a park when they were hit. The other seven died. His father brought him here with his fourteen-year-old brother who was keeping him company. The father had gone back to Afghanistan. The hospital was full. Every bed had a story to tell, but I felt my curiosity was unwelcome. Anyway, what use was it to know that the Cruise missiles which killed Abdul's friends and ripped off his leg, as well as those of all the other poor wretches who had made the long journey to this grimy provincial hospital as their last hope and now lay there motionless and silent, what use was it to know those missiles fell where they did because of "computer errors"? We should just stop making them.

The convoy for Chaman, on the occasions when it does actually leave, departs from Quetta at ten in the morning. The idea was to take a small group of authorized journalists to the border post, let them stay there for a couple of hours and then bring them back to Quetta. The Pakistanis are not especially keen to publicize the many forms of traffic across the border, and rumour has it they encourage little boys in the refugee camps to throw stones at visitors to keep them at a distance. I detest this kind of guided tour,

and as soon as we set foot in Chaman my two students and I disappeared. The locals were hostile, and we didn't manage to reach our cloth trader's house. We were saved by one of the little ambulances belonging to Abdul Saddar Edhi, the "saint" of Karachi, which go back and forth across the border to collect the wounded. In the afternoon I managed to meet a delegation of Taliban, to whom I submitted an application to go to Kandahar the next day. But I wasn't allowed to spend the night at Chaman. The police found us, and after they'd kicked the students a few times and with a bit of diplomacy on my part, we were allowed to go.

Here too chance gave us a hand. We were on our way back to Quetta, with a jeep-load of commandos following behind to keep us in sight, when right at the top of the Khojak Pass our car got a puncture. This meant a ten-minute stop, and gave me the most majestic, unforgettable vision of Afghanistan and the absurdity of what the West, with the U.S. at its head, was trying to do to us. The sun had just set, and a pale half-moon began to turn silver in the pastel sky above a range of mountains. Sometimes pink, sometimes violet or ochre, barren but somehow alive, they were like the waves of a sea frozen by eternity. On a peak nearby, a dozen or so lorry drivers had laid out their prayer mats in the dust and, like scraps of black paper against that backdrop of immensity, they bowed rhythmically towards the West, in the knowledge that at that same moment millions of other Muslims were performing the same gesture, facing the same way and with the same thoughts directed to the same ineffable god who held them all in the kind of communion which we no longer experience.

I thought of my last Sunday in Florence after 11 September, when I went round the different churches just to hear what was being said. The answer was nothing, and I came away very disappointed. From San Miniato to Santo Spirito and Santa Maria Novella, the priests all read out the same passages of Scripture and discussed the same generalities, with not a single reference to today's life or the

anxiety people were feeling for what was going on in the world. Here in Pakistan, the mosques thunder and sometimes rant every Friday, but at least they unite the faithful and give them something to think about and devote themselves to, even if it is on occasions misguided. Our church prefers to maintain its silence rather than break the ranks of political orthodoxy and speak out convincingly for peace.

I watched the endless sequence of mountains as they quickly grew dark. I wondered how on earth the Americans could hope to find the cave where Osama was hiding in that moon-like labyrinth. There are supposed to be at least 8,000 such caves, each with tunnels which can stretch for miles, with many entrances and many different levels. And even if they find him? Under the terms on which it's been declared, the war will not end here.

Europe seemed a long way away from that pass in the mountains of Asia, just as I'm sure what's going on here feels a long way away in Europe. But it's not like that. What is happening in Afghanistan is very close indeed. It affects us. Not just because the fall of Kabul is emphatically not the solution to Afghanistan's problems, but because this is "only the first phase". Iraq, Somalia and Sudan are all much closer.

What will we do when Bush decides he wants to go and bomb those countries? Have we reckoned with the Muslims who live among us and who might for the moment be indifferent to the war in Afghanistan, but who might also become less so if we go and bomb their homes? Do we want to be a party to Israeli-style killings of all those the CIA decides to put on its blacklist?

In my opinion it would be far wiser for Europe to signal its dissent now, speak with one voice rather than letting its individual governments play their several roles of satellites to Washington, and like a true friend and ally help America find a way out of this snare.

Some days ago, an Urdu newspaper argued convincingly

that all the countries which are now in one way or another urging the Americans to get involved in Afghanistan, are doing so because deep down they hope America will come unstuck and its credibility as a major power be challenged in the process. Iran, China, Russia and above all Pakistan have good reason to resent them and to be profoundly disturbed by this new military presence in the heart of Central Asia. This is not at all the position which Europe finds itself in.

However, at the same time Europe cannot remain completely indifferent to the possibility that behind the screen of this international war on terror, the United States may pursue its own plan of bringing about a new world order which will advance the national interests of America alone.

The present U.S. administration consists mainly of Cold War veterans, chief among whom is the Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld. This alone is enough to suggest that such a temptation is real. It is this team which has links to the interests of the arms industry, which has always opposed arms limitation treaties and is now demanding they be abrogated. It is this team which has said in the past that nuclear weapons are made to be used and not locked up forever in silos.

America has looked upon the gradual reduction of its military expenditure with some unease since the end of the Cold War and with it all genuine threat. It has done all it can to identify a new enemy, in order to justify scrapping its old weapons in favour of a whole new set of "smart" systems which are adequate to wage the technological warfare of the 21st century. A prime candidate for the role of enemy was North Korea, till it turned out to be literally starving and therefore hardly likely to mount a serious challenge to America's might. Then it was the turn of China, but it proved difficult to make a convincing case for Beijing being able to threaten anywhere other than Taiwan, seeing as at that stage it didn't even have a long-range bomber. Then came the Islam hypothesis, an enemy America would have to defend itself against in the newly-invented "clash of

civilizations".

The massacre of 11 September has made Islam an extremely credible enemy, and has allowed America to launch an entire political programme which would otherwise have been unacceptable. The enemy has now been identified as the terrorists, and the demonization of those Washington defines as such has already begun. The first to pay the price are the Taliban ex-*mujahideen* and Osama bin Laden, whom, lest it be forgotten, were America's own invention from the days when it needed their help to fight the Soviet Union.

Europe cannot follow America along this path without stopping first to think. It must go back to its own history and experience of diversity in order to find the strength it needs for dialogue, rather than engage in any clash of civilizations.

Among other things, the greatness of a culture lies in its permeability. It would be a start if they stopped attacking one another with aeroplanes full of innocent citizens or dropping bombs by mistake on people who are guilty of nothing.

Even Islamic fundamentalists such as the Taliban can change in their own way. If they had been recognized as the legitimate government of Afghanistan when they took power in 1996, maybe the Buddhas of Bamiyan would still be there now, and maybe the red carpet would not have been rolled out for Osama bin Laden in quite the way it was. Even the Taliban live in this world, and they too have to adapt to it in their own way.

When I went to the Afghan consulate in Quetta to apply for a visa for Kandahar, the Taliban official who received me had a brand new computer on his desk. Perhaps he was following the latest reports of his country on the Internet, to get some idea of how long he would be in his post now that Kabul had fallen.

On my way back to the inn, I stop off at the hospital

to say hello to Abdul Wasey. The corridor is full of Afghans who have just arrived with more wounded. In the bed next to Abdul's there is now a man aged around fifty, whose stomach has been ripped open by shrapnel. He sees me hand Abdul a couple of things I have brought him. With an effort he summons up the breath he needs and shouts out: "First you bomb us, then you come and bring us biscuits. Shame on you!".

I don't know what to do. I try to find within me some kind of justification or at least some words. Then I think of the French, German and Italian soldiers who will soon join this war, and I understand that now, as I near the end of this life in which I have always seen people killed or wounded by others, it will be my turn to see the victims of my own bombs and my own bullets, here in this hospital or elsewhere. And truly I am ashamed.

LETTER FROM KABUL

The potato seller and the wolf cage

Kabul, 19 December 2001

The view is stunning, the most beautiful I could ever imagine. I wake up each morning, my sleeping bag stretched out on a floor made of concrete plus the occasional plastic tile, in an empty room on the uppermost storey of the tallest building in the city centre. My gaze is filled with all that any traveller headed here could dream of. The fabled crown of mountains which the emperor Babur, head of the Mogul dynasty, saw only once then hankered after till the day he died, even choosing to be buried here. The valley traversed by a river on whose banks Kabul itself was built, Kabul the city of which a poet once wrote, in a play on the two Persian syllables which make up its name: 'My home? here is my home: a drop of dew amid the petals of a rose'. The old bazaar of the Four Arcades, where they used to say you can find every object made by nature or human skill. The mosque of Puli-i-Khisti. The mausoleum of Timur Shah. The sanctuary of the King of Two Swords, built in honour of the first Muslim commander who according to the legend had his head cut off in battle in the seventh century A.D. but fought on regardless with a weapon in each hand, so determined was he to impose Islam, the new, aggressive religion recently founded in Arabia, on a population which for more than a thousand years had been happily Hindu or Buddhist. And high, dominating the crest of the range of

hills immediately before my windows, is the fortress of Bala Hissar, in whose palace every victor in Afghan history has resided, and in whose dungeons every loser has languished or had his throat cut.

The view is superb, but it's given me no peace since I arrived here over a fortnight ago with a letter of introduction for an old intellectual in my pocket, a little library of companion guides in my bag and a great mixture of anger and hope in my heart. I can't enjoy it, because I've never felt the stupidity of the fate to which man has devoted himself as keenly as I do when I look out of these dusty windows, at times almost as though it were a physical pain I were experiencing. With one hand he builds up, with the other he destroys. He uses his imagination to create great wonders, then with equal passion and refinement turns everything around him into desert and massacres his fellow beings.

Sooner or later man will have to change course and renounce violence. The message is clear. Just look at Kabul, where all that remains of what the guidebooks describe is just that: remains. The fortress is a pile of rubble, the river a fetid stream of excrement and refuse, the bazaar an expanse of tents, huts and containers. The mausoleums, the domes and the temples have all been gutted, and all that's left of the old city with its rows of houses of mud and inlaid wood are pathetic, ochre-coloured stumps stretching for hundreds and hundreds of metres, like the spires of sandcastles which children build on the water's edge, only for the waves to come and wash them right away.

Many monuments have literally disappeared. The enigmatic Minari-i-Chakari or Column of Light, built in the first century A.D. on the old Jalalabad road outside Kabul, possibly to commemorate the enlightenment of Buddha, failed to stand up to the artillery fire and in 1998 was reduced to a heap of ancient stones.

In no way can Kabul still be called a city. It's a teeming anthill of human misery, an immense dusty cemetery. Everything is dust, and more and more I get the feeling

that this dust, which constantly blackens my hands, fills my nose and enters my lungs, is all that remains of the palaces, the houses, the parks, the flowers and the trees which made this valley a paradise. The boast of Kabul used to be its seven different types of grape, its thirty-three types of tulip and its seven great gardens thick with cedar trees. Now there's absolutely nothing. And not because of some divine curse, a volcano erupting, a river flooding or any other kind of natural disaster. No. This paradise was lost once, twice, then many times over for one single reason and that alone: war. The war waged centuries ago by the invaders. The war brought in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by the British, who now somewhat tactlessly have decided to come back at the head of the "peace force". The war of the past twenty years which we have all been involved in one way or another, even if only by selling weapons to one of the protagonists. And now the American war, a cold war of machines against men.

Maybe it's my age which has made me develop this hysterical sensitivity to violence, but everywhere I look I see bullet holes, shrapnel damage and scorch-marks from explosions. I feel like I myself have been pierced, mutilated and burnt. Maybe I've lost that objectivity which impartial observers are meant to have, if indeed I ever did have it. Or maybe it's just me recalling a verse which Gandhi used to recite in his daily prayers, where he asked to be able to "imagine the sufferings of others in order to understand the world". But I simply can't bring myself to be detached, as if what is going on didn't affect me.

From my windows up here I see a man walking slowly along, continually turning round to look at a young woman with only one leg who's limping along behind him. She might be his daughter. I too have a daughter, and only now, for the first time in my life, does it occur to me that she too might step on a mine. It's cold enough to chap the skin now, and I see a group of child beggars lighting bonfires out of bags and other bits of plastic they've found in the rubbish tips. I have a grandson their age, and I imagine

him breathing in that stinking, carcinogenic air just to keep warm. After several days' search, I finally manage to find the elderly gentleman for whom I had the letter of introduction. He had been the curator of the museum of Kabul. I found him at the bazaar in Karte Ariana, where he was selling potatoes to support his family. This could have happened to me. It could still happen to any of us. All because of a war.

People tell me that during the worst years of the war between 1992 and 1996, when the factions of the Northern Alliance who now govern Kabul killed over 50,000 civilians and made this city its battleground and slaughterhouse, the great iron containers which had held the weapons and ammunition that travelled first by sea, then overland through Pakistan from America for the *jihad* against the USSR, had been turned by groups of *mujahideen* into prisons for their enemies. Sometimes as a form of reprisal the *muhahideen* just left the prisoners in them; sometimes they roasted them alive by setting fire to petrol cans placed round the outside. I don't know whether or not this story is true, but I do know that I can no longer look at one of these containers – and there are thousands of them everywhere, recycled to provide housing, shops and workshops – without thinking of it.

Every object, every wall, every face here seems to me to have been marked by the terrible violence which was, and still is even as I write, war.

Not even the dawn can raise the spirits here in Kabul, after a night of sleep broken by the noise of the B-52s flying high overhead. The sun looks like a fire behind the screen of mountains which for ages remain like scraps of dark paper against the horizon. Occasionally, while Kabul is still in shadow, a military B-52 is suddenly lit up with the first golden rays of the sun. It becomes like some mysterious, disquieting bird of prey intent on writing strange messages of death in the turquoise-black sky.

The B-52s are not here just to bomb the hideouts of Bin

Laden's men or the convoys the Americans suspect might be hiding Mullah Omar. They are here to remind everyone that they are this country's new policemen, its new judges and puppet-masters. This was exactly the message sent by the American flag-raising ceremony which took place here last Monday, the same day as the great Muslim feast of Id at the end of Ramadan, with the marine band playing *God bless America*, the speeches, the guard of honour, and the slow, slow raising of the stars and stripes on the pole in the embassy garden. Various other embassies in Kabul have opened their doors again, and diplomats from Iran, Turkey, France, China, Britain and Italy have all dusted off their desks. But no-one else has made such a fuss over such a routine event.

The Americans have some kind of obsession with their flag. The one they put back up in their Kabul embassy is the same one they lowered in 1989. But it wasn't the first to be planted back on Afghan soil. That was the one the marines raised at their base on the outskirts of Kandahar at the start of the military campaign. They called their base "Camp Justice", and to make it clear that in this case justice above all meant vengeance, they raised a flag which had been signed by relatives of the victims of the Twin Towers.

The Afghans have no difficulty in understanding this kind of thing. The great bazaar of the Four Arcades, with its famous murals and floral decorations, was razed to the ground and sacked by British troops in 1842 to avenge the murder of two emissaries from London, and the subsequent slaughter by the Afghans of 16,000 men and their families on the road from Kabul to Jalalabad. A single doctor survived to tell the tale. In 1880 it was the British again who hanged the twenty-nine Afghan leaders of a new separatist movement in the fortress courtyard, then destroyed most of Bala Hissar so that "no-one may ever forget that we know how to avenge our own men", as Her Majesty's general in charge of the operation wrote.

With memories such as these recalled by many of the monuments and street and district names in modern-day

Kabul, it would certainly have been more diplomatic if the mysterious entity which calls itself the "international community", and which increasingly seems to be a private club existing exclusively for the personal benefit of the United States, had entrusted the command of its peace force to a country which, unlike Britain, was not associated here with colonialism, aggression and a record that is nothing to be proud of, namely the first aerial bombing in history in which the victims were civilians, carried out by the British airforce on Kabul in 1919.

Centuries previously the Afghans had experienced another, even more memorable act of vengeance. Passing through the Bamiyan plain in 1221, Genghis Khan had seen his nephew killed by an Afghan arrow, and ordered that no sign of life be left in that valley. For days on end, Mongul soldiers slit the throats of every man, woman, child and animal until it is said their swords had no blade left and their arms hung limp with exhaustion. Then they cut down every tree and uprooted every plant. So it was that the great Buddhas, carved in the rocks but already bereft of the gold covering which had originally adorned them, looked blankly out over the plain for hundreds of years ... until other warriors, this time the Taliban, came and demolished them with their bazookas, perhaps in order to avenge the international community's refusal to recognize them as the legitimate government of Afghanistan, despite having every reason to do so.

Now it is the Taliban's turn to be victims of the Americans, who want to avenge their own dead and above all restore the notion of their invincibility to the world. The fact that the Taliban were not directly and perhaps not even indirectly responsible for those deaths is neither here nor there. Nor is it deemed relevant that the Afghans, who were certainly not involved in the Twin Towers massacre, should be the first to pay the price for that act of revenge. How much it cost remains a mystery.

This war has been followed by hundreds of journalists. More pages of print and more hours of television have been

dedicated to it than to any war previously, yet with great determination the United States has managed to keep it invisible, and never will reveal the full truth behind it.

There remain questions in this war that the United States refuses to answer and which for this reason have stopped being asked. Here are some of them: how many completely innocent civilian victims have there been so far? Already far more than the victims of Twin Towers, in my opinion. How many casualties have there been among the Taliban military? I reckon more than ten thousand. The only proof I have is small but significant. Before coming to Afghanistan I went back to Peshawar and the region dominated by Islamic fundamentalists where I had met the young men setting off enthusiastically to join the *jihad* just after the war had started. I bumped into one of them again, who had managed to struggle back in defeat. He said the B-52s' carpet bombs had been terrifying and lethal. Along with his comrades he had gone to fight the Americans, but they didn't even see them. He had only heard the roar of their aeroplanes high in the sky and experienced the devastating consequences of their bombs all around: men literally blown to bits, others crushed by the terrifying blast, who died with blood streaming from their ears and noses. Only three survived out of a group of forty-three. If the same had occurred where the Taliban had actually put up some resistance and tried to defend their territory as they did for weeks at Kandahar, the losses must have been considerable.

The Taliban have no anti-aircraft defence. They are confined to fixed positions, in primitive trenches and mud forts, at the mercy of the massive, incessant aerial hammering which the Americans are meting out. Never in the history of warfare perhaps has there been such an unequal war, one where the losses on either side have been so blatantly disproportionate. The United States has inflicted thousands and thousands of deaths while hardly incurring any itself. Yet in no way had this altered my young *jihadi*'s view of the world. It hadn't impaired his blind faith in Islam, induced him to hate the West any less nor admire the

Americans for their military superiority. Not in the slightest. "Our weapons are not sufficient to reach the Americans in their aeroplanes. Now it is up to Allah to decide what to do", he said. His having become a *ghazi*, a veteran of the *jihad*, now gave him a position of prestige in the village and in the Islamic fundamentalist organization under whose orders he said he intended to remain. "And what if they order you to place a bomb in New York or somewhere else?", I asked him. "I will do it", he replied without hesitation. In this perverse chain of violence, what other kind of revenge can an uneducated, obtuse Muslim boy in a mud village in Asia now imagine against the pilot of a B-52 who in his eyes has massacred dozens of his comrades?

The terrorism to which the Americans fell victim in New York and Washington arose precisely because of the kind of asymmetrical situation which began with the end of the Cold War. As long as the world was bipolar and the threat of reciprocal nuclear annihilation held the two superpowers in check, the Soviet Union and the United States couldn't afford to go around the world doing whatever they liked. Sooner or later one of them reached the limit imposed by the other and had to call a halt. This is no longer the case. The United States' sophisticated military arsenal is now unparalleled, and today it can intervene in many parts of the world, especially the poorer ones. It can afford to indulge in whatever violence it likes, safe in the knowledge that any response it provokes will be puny in comparison. The United States runs no risk whatsoever in extending the war today to Afghanistan and tomorrow to Sudan, Somalia, Iraq or Syria. The only possible risk it can run is that of an inversely asymmetrical response, i.e. terrorism.

The way in which the Americans have decided to react to the attacks on New York and Washington will not solve the problem. On the contrary it will make matters worse, because it will simply reaffirm the imbalance. By trying to protect themselves, the Americans have made everyone else more vulnerable and the whole world a more precarious, less pleasant place to live.

Another question which can't be asked about the war the Americans are waging in Afghanistan is: what has happened to the hundreds of families of the Arabs who came to fight the *jihad* againt the Soviets here on behalf of the United States, and then stayed on as followers of Osama bin Laden? A group of these families lived in the house next to the one where my potato seller lives. "There were several women and at least ten children. One night they all got back into trucks and left", he says. Where are they now?

My young *jihadi* from outside Peshawar told of how he had crossed the region around Tora Bora on his way back to Pakistan, and had seen Arab fighters going up to Pashtun peasants and begging them to take their wives and children with them, making them promise they would look after them, much as Jewish children were left with Aryan peasants so they might survive the Nazi raids. What have these people done wrong? Who will look after them?

The victims of this war aren't only those who have already died under the bombs. They are also those who will die in the months to come, because the most deprived regions in Afghanistan have been deprived still further by the American bombs and mines. They are those who are dying this very minute because the cynical pursuit of war has held up the vital food supplies from World Food Programme (a UN agency currently run by an American lady) for months.

At this moment there are hundreds of thousands of Afghans, some 250,000 of them in Maslakh near Herat alone, who have ended up in remote parts of the country to avoid the American bombs. Food cannot reach them there in this season because of the snow. They are already starving, and mass deaths are a serious risk. But theirs is a tragedy which passes unnoticed. It upsets the positive picture which the spokesmen of the international coalition against terrorism are intent on presenting to the world, and which no-one bar the odd horrified, insubordinate U.N. official even mentions or gets angry about. If anyone does raise a question, the response thus far has always been the same: "Remember 11 September", as if those victims justify

everything, as if their lives were different from and much more important than theirs.

One form of violence generates another. Only by breaking this vicious circle can we hope for some kind of solution, but no-one seems prepared to take the first step. Among the numerous non-governmental organizations which now fill Afghanistan, bringing with them not just their countries' money but their own versions of humanitarianism and aid too, I have not heard of a single one which planned to come here and work towards reconciliation, to propose non-violence or to urge the Afghans – and maybe others too – to reflect on the futility of retaliation. And my God, how they could do with it! Rarely have I seen a country so imbued with violence and hostility, so ready for war. Everywhere I turn I feel hatred. The Tajiks hate the Pashtuns, the Uzbeks hate the Tajiks, the Pashtuns hate the Uzbeks and everyone hates the Hazaras, who to this day are seen as the descendants of the Mongul hordes (their name means "in thousands") and heirs of Genghis Khan.

I've always believed that suffering was a teacher of wisdom, and coming to Afghanistan where they have seen so much of it, I truly expected to find fertile ground for reflection on non-violence and commitment to peace. No chance. Not even here, where the need for it is most obvious.

One of the most moving places in Kabul is the orthopaedic centre of the International Committee of the Red Cross. Pain and hope are found in their most concentrated forms here. The director of the centre is Alberto Cairo, a quiet, efficient man from Turin. He is the only person at the centre who has two arms and two legs. All the others, the patients, the employees, doctors and technicians, have some part of them missing. Even the cleaner here has only one leg. "Working here helps us feel useful, and helps those who come here minus a limb to realize that life can go on", said the young man accompanying me. He was a translator. He had been cycling home one day when a Northern Alliance sniper hit him in the leg, shattering it above the knee. "The man who did this to you will be back in Kabul now, if he's not dead

already", I said absent-mindedly. "Have you forgiven him?" "No, no. If I could I'd kill him", he replied. Everyone listening to us felt the same way.

In the women's section, a girl of thirteen is learning to walk with a new plastic foot, moving slowly along the line of red footmarks on the floor. One day six months ago, her mother asked her to go and fetch some firewood. Shortly afterwards she heard an explosion, soon followed by the screams. The child is being helped along by a physiotherapist, who herself is minus a leg. She lost it years ago on a mine hidden in the school yard. I ask her if she holds out any hope for a world without war. She laughs, as if I'd told her a funny story. "Impossible, impossible", she says.

Every politician who visits Kabul shows up at Alberto Cairo's centre, bringing aid to help him continue his highly commendable work. What no-one has the courage to say is that the only way to put an end to this work, to the handouts and visits from politicians is to ban with immediate effect the manufacture and sale of every single mine imaginable. The international community ought to send a peace force to dismantle every single mine factory in the world, wherever it might be.

Alberto Cairo has been in Afghanistan for twelve years, and expects to stay here for the rest of his life. There is certainly no shortage of work for him. Besides the millions of old mines, there are now also all the new ones the Americans are scattering from the skies. He too smiles at my hope of a world without war. "War is the salt of life in Afghanistan", he says. "It's tastier than peace". This isn't cynicism on his part; it's realism.

But I can't resign myself, even though I realize we are living through a particularly tragic moment in the history of mankind. For weeks now, all I have seen and heard about this war seems to be designed to prove that man is absolutely not the noblest part of creation, and that he is experiencing a severe setback on his road to civilization before our very

eyes and with our own involvement. Just when a set of rules for human coexistence seemed to be assured and shared by the majority, just as the United Nations seemed set to become the forum for resolving conflicts, and the various conventions on human rights, on the protection of children, women and the environment, to have laid the foundation for a new international ethic, everything has been turned upside down, and administering death to others has once again become a technical, bureaucratic routine, just as the transportation of Jews was at the end for Eichmann.

Prisoners are being shot with their hands tied behind their backs before the eyes of Western soldiers, sometimes with their active involvement. The massacre is conveniently classified as a "prison revolt", and duly filed as such. Entire villages, whose only crime is that they happen to be in the proximity of a mountain called Tora Bora, are being flattened by carpet bombing. There are hundreds of victims, but their existence is shamelessly denied with statements to the effect that "all the targets hit were military". A figure of the importance of Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld describes Osama bin Laden's fighters as "wounded animals", hence particularly dangerous and to be gunned down if at all possible, even though the refusal to accept an unarmed combatant's surrender constitutes a war crime under the Geneva Convention. The fact that Rumsfeld's almost daily appearances on the podium at the Pentagon have become one of the most popular and keenly followed television programmes in America says a great deal about the current state of a large proportion of humanity.

Even torture has ceased to be a taboo subject for the Western conscience, and its legitimacy is openly discussed on talkshows in the context of extracting information from suspects which could save American lives. Hardly anyone protests. No-one openly asks if the marines, special forces or CIA agents who are interrogating hundreds of Taliban and Arabs to discover the whereabouts of Osama bin Laden, do so while respecting the norms whereby prisoners of war

are required only to give their personal details. The international community seems now to have accepted that American national interest must prevail over every other principle, including that of national sovereignty, which used to be considered sacrosanct.

Even the American press has shelved many of the time-honoured principles which used to give it such an important role in checking those who hold power. With my own eyes I saw the text of an article which the correspondent of a major newspaper wrote from Afghanistan and the version of it which was subsequently published. Once upon a time it would have caused an uproar. Not any more. "We've become Pravda", the journalist said.

When another correspondent suggested writing a psychological portrait of Mullah Omar partly to explain how and why the supreme Taliban chief was putting his regime's existence in jeopardy by refusing to hand over Bin Laden, his editors replied: "No. The American public isn't ready for this yet". The truth is that everything which humanizes the enemy and which could explain his reasons must be avoided. The enemy must be demonized and presented as an unacceptable monster which must be eliminated.

There was only one moment in CNN's live coverage of the Mazar-i-Sharif fortress massacre where there was even a touch of compassion for those hundreds of corpses so obscenely strewn across the courtyard, from whose gaping mouths a Northern Alliance soldier was already going round trying to salvage some gold. A Swiss member of the International Committee of the Red Cross appeared on screen. He said he was there to photograph the dead and try to identify them. "Every one of them has a family", he added. This short sequence and these few words were cut every time the report was shown subsequently.

Meanwhile, there was another story which wasn't cut. In fact it was repeated endlessly, especially on the Voice of America and in the BBC's Asian broadcasts. Groups of Taliban on the rampage were supposed to have stopped

buses along the Kabul-Jalalabad road a few days ago and checked the length of each passenger's beard, just as they did in the days when they were in power. If said beard fell short of the required "Islamic" length, they chopped off the offender's nose and ears, and the victims were taken to hospital in Kabul and Jalalabad. I went round every hospital in the capital one morning looking for these poor unfortunates, but couldn't find a single one. There weren't any. The story was false, but once it had been broadcast nobody bothered to deny it. Equally false was a story used as another example of Taliban atrocities, by Cherie Blair no less, which suggested that any woman who painted her nails under the regime of Mullah Omar had them extracted by force.

The emotions which have been stirred by a whole series of false news items, including the one about phials of nerve gas being "found" at an al-Qaeda training camp near Jalalabad, have helped to make the horrors more acceptable and ensure that the victims are included as part of the "inevitable price" which has to be paid for freeing the world from the dangers of terrorism. This is the aim of the U.S. administration's policy of information and disinformation, and it is this which has fed Western public opinion. Self-censorship by the American media, and to a large extent the European media, has done the rest.

The determination with which the United States has pursued silencing every dissident voice and drying up every possible source of alternative truth was demonstrated by the missile which fell "by mistake" on the headquarters of al Jazeera, the Arab television station in Kabul. I went to have a look. There was no mistake. The small villa which housed it was the third in a row of identical, single-storey concrete buildings, all surrounded by small gardens, in an avenue like many others in the district of Wazir Akbar Khan. There were no barracks nearby, no ministries, armoured cars or any other potential military targets. In the middle of the night a single missile launched from an aeroplane at high altitude fell on precisely this villa, totally gutting it. It

was a blow against freedom of speech all right, but one which by now is taken for granted, accepted and justified, a blow which has come to form part of our lives like the American special military tribunals, the arrests with no legal guarantees and the death sentences with no appeals.

Yet none of this, not the innocent victims, not the massacre of prisoners, not the restrictions on our basic rights nor the profound injustice of the war has shaken public opinion. Not in America, certainly, but not in Europe either.

In truth, what is happening to the Afghans is happening to us too, not that we are aware of it, and the widespread indifference currently being manifested towards it has roots which go deep. Years of unbridled materialism have reduced and marginalized the role of morality in people's lives, meaning values such as money, profit and social success are the only yardstick by which we make judgements. Prosperous, consumerist man, with no time to stop and reflect, more and more caught up in the mechanism of a highly competitive life which leaves less and less space for the private, has lost his ability to feel or to get angry. Everything is centred on himself, and he has no eyes and no heart for what goes on around him.

This new type of Western man, cynical and insensitive, egotistical and politically correct (whatever the politics involved might be), is the product of our wealthy, developed society, and he frightens me as much as the man with a Kalashnikov and the look of a big-time cut-throat who stands on the corner of every street here. These two men are comparable. They are different examples of the same phenomenon: men who have forgotten they have a conscience, are unclear about their role in the universe, and have become the most destructive of all living creatures, polluting the waters of the earth, cutting down its forests, killing its animals and using ever more sophisticated, varied forms of violence against their fellows. All of this is clear to me in Afghanistan. It burns within me, and makes me very, very angry.

The only moment of joy I have had in this country, now I come to think of it, was when I was flying over it. From the porthole of a little nine-seater United Nations aircraft on the way from Islamabad to Kabul, the world looked as though man had never existed and had left not a single trace of himself. From up there the world was simply wonderful. There were no borders, no conflicts, no flags to die for nor fatherlands to defend.

I pity those whom love of self

binds to their fatherland.

The fatherland is but

a field of tents in a desert of stone,

says an old Himalayan song which Fosco Maraini quotes in his *Secret Tibet*. Even if those tents had been there I wouldn't have seen them.

As a precaution the aircraft flew at an altitude of ten thousand kilometres, and the earth, ochre, violet and grey in turn, was like the wrinkled skin of an old giant, the rivers his veins. Before us, like a stormy sea which had suddenly been frozen, was the snowy barrier of the Hindu Kush, the "assassin of Hindus", so-called because hundreds of thousands of Indians died in the cold in these mountains while being shipped off as slaves towards Central Asia by their Mogul conquerors.

Because of its geographical position Afghanistan has always been one of the world's major corridors. All the great religions, civilizations and empires have passed through it over the centuries, all the races, ideas, merchandise and arts. A visionary-cum-philosopher such as Zarathustra was born here, as was a poet of the stature of Rumi. Here the Vedic hymns which form the basis of the Indian sacred scriptures were written, and from here came the first grammatical analysis of Sanskrit, the language to which all our languages are indebted. All those who have gone to rob India of its material riches over the centuries have passed through here too, as did India's own spiritual riches,

Buddhism, as it spread to Central Asia, China, Korea and then Japan. It was here in Afghanistan that Buddhism encountered the Greek legacy bequeathed by Alexander the Great, and found expression in some of its most refined artistic forms. Afghanistan is a vast, deep mine of human history, buried beneath the surface of places such as Mazar-i-Sharif, Kabul, Kunduz, Herat, Ghazni and Balkh, the ancient Bactria known as the "mother of all cities".

"And what are you doing here?", asked an American traveller in 1924, surprised to find an Italian embassy along with those of the great powers in Kabul. "Archeology", replied the then plenipotentiary minister Paternò dei Marchi. Our scientific missions have made many excavations in Afghanistan since the start of the last century, so it was truly painful to hear in the first weeks of the raids that the American B-52s were practising their own new forms of archeological dig as they carpet-bombed these precious sites in their hunt for the Taliban.

This is the fate of Afghanistan: to be the focus of someone else's interests. It has always been the stake in someone else's great gamble, from the Greeks to the Persians, the Monguls, the Turks, and in the nineteenth century the Russians and the British. It's just the same now.

When the United Nations aircraft landed on the runway at Bagram, a place which two thousand years ago was the capital of a great civilization, the Kushan Empire, of which the wars have swept away all trace, the new gamblers were all there, on this concrete strip in the middle of a valley which is now deserted, punctuated only by the spectral presence of shells of armoured cars, helicopters, lorries, aeroplanes and artillery. While the three marines and an Alsatian, also American, came and meticulously sniffed through my baggage, some Russian soldiers slightly further on pottered about near an aeroplane and a row of trucks with their flaps down on which was written: "For the children of Afghanistan from Russia". You could make out the silhouettes of some British troops against a backdrop of ruined barracks. You had to look at the stupendous

mountains, which appeared to come alive and move with the changes of the shadows and colours of the sunset, if you weren't to lose all hope. It was only the same old story starting up all over again.

The international community thinks it's found a solution to Afghanistan's problems with a formula which combines violence and cash, Afghan soldiers guilty of a variety of crimes but now held in check (as is everyone) by the B-52s and a respectable figure such as Hamid Karzai, the only (weak) Pashtun among the strong representatives of the other ethnic groups.

I hope the formula works, but I doubt it. Even in Kabul life begins again. I saw it do so in Pnom Penh when the Khmer Rouge fell and I saw it do so in the forests of Laos and Vietnam, which the Americans had defoliated with chemicals and carcinogenic agents. But what sort of life? A new, more aware, more tolerant, more serene life, or the kind of life to which we've become accustomed, aggressive, rapacious and violent?

One of the moments I'll never forget from these days in Kabul was my visit to the zoo. "It's well worth it, believe me", suggested the potato-seller. It was Friday, the Muslims' feast day, and a few dozen people had paid the 2,000 afghani or just under three pence to go and see the most pathetic, wretched collection of animals one could possibly imagine: a little bear with a peeling, purulent nose, a blind old lion which could no longer stand up and whose mate had just died, a doe, an owl, two moulting eagles and lots of rabbits and pigeons. The zoo was the front line for a while during the battles between the various Northern Alliance *mujahideen* groups before the Taliban arrived. Bombs and missiles fell on it and broke open many cages, allowing various animals to escape. The wolves were not so fortunate, and two old specimens remained in a stinking cage with no water into which a warden threw scraps of meat once a day. They've been there for years, those wolves, prisoners shut up in the same space. They know each other very well, but continually shuffle round warily, rubbing up against

the walls which they've made shiny and the netting which is now just patchwork. Every time their paths cross they snarl, bare their teeth and attack each other, urged on by a little crowd of men who perhaps delude themselves into thinking they're somehow different, not realizing they too are shut up in the cage of existence, waiting to die there.

Maybe it'd be just as well to live in peace, then.

LETTER FROM DELHI

Hei Ram

Delhi, 5 January, 2002

India is home. I've lived here for years. It's here that I keep my books, that I find the refuge a man seeks from the world's hustle and bustle. Here, as nowhere else, I get a sense of the senseless flowing of life. But now even India is a disappointment. Even India talks only of war, mobilizes troops and artillery and threatens to use its atomic bombs against Pakistan. Like a star pupil who's just learnt the absurd George W. Bush doctrine of "with us or with the terrorists" off by heart, it happily wags its tail behind the American military bandwagon. A country of a billion people! The country which owes its independence to Gandhi, the Mahatma, the noble soul, today a country just like any other. What a pity.

This was India's chance to go back to its roots, to rediscover the ancient language of non-violence, its true strength. It was India's opportunity to return to its recent history of non-alignment, to remind the world of the middle way which is always there, and which in this case means not with them and not with the terrorists either.

Instead, even in India we hear nothing but the rhetoric of "shoulder to shoulder", the litany of the international coalition against terrorism, a great outpouring of rage and pride, of courage and determination, of readiness for

sacrifice. All this for one of two reasons. Either those currently in power hope to take advantage of the situation created by the American attack on Afghanistan to use force to solve the Kashmiri problem, despite the fact that no amount of force has managed to solve it in fifty years (three wars have been waged between India and Pakistan already); or, worse still, the largest party in India's ruling coalition, the BJP, hopes that mouthing off about the war, even if they don't really want it, might help tip the balance in their favour in the imminent elections in two of the country's major states. This is what the world is like these days, even in India: no principles but plenty of expedients; no spiritual aspirations, only the desire for large or small material gain.

The lessons of the past have all been forgotten. Here's a small one which, like all of Gandhi's, gives food for thought. India and Pakistan formally became two independent states in 1947. In fact they were still two bleeding stumps of the same body, which the duplicity of British colonial power had helped to divide. Gandhi opposed partition with all his might. He said that both Pakistan and India were his countries, and he rejected the idea of a passport to go from one to the other. His idealism was defeated, and his fasting failed to stem the desperate exodus of biblical proportions and the massacre of almost a million people. The realism of small and large interests prevailed.

Partition was based loosely on religious grouping, with the Hindus on one side and the Muslims on the other. The maharajahs of the 562 princely states were left to decide which side they wanted to be on. The Maharajah of Kashmir was torn. He was Hindu, but most of his subjects were Muslim. So for two months he remained formally independent. Pakistan exploited this situation by sending "volunteers" into Kashmir to annex that precious plot of land. The Indians exploited it by pressing the Maharajah to decide in their favour and sending their troops into Kashmir. The war had already begun when the two countries had to divide up the reserves they still held in a joint account in Delhi, to complete the partition of what had been the British

Empire in India. Nehru, the Indian Prime Minister at the time, argued that Pakistan would use its share to fund the war in Kashmir, so India should keep it all. Gandhi disagreed. In his eyes, no reason could prevail over the sacrosanct principle of justice. Pakistan had a right to its share, and India had to give it to them. So it was. What a lesson! One that cost him his life. It was immediately after this decision to give Pakistan the 550 million rupees, that Gandhi, already accused by the Hindu fundamentalists of being biased towards the Muslim, was assassinated on 30 January 1948.

From that moment on there has been no peace between India and Pakistan. Kashmir has been destroyed, tormented and divided by a so-called "line of control", across which the two armies still face each other, but now with nuclear missiles. It's still a battlefield, and as in all the wars till now, it's been mostly the civilians who have died.

If Gandhi or someone else of his moral stature were here today, they would well understand that no-one has been "just" in the Kashmiri question, that Pakistan and India bear enormous responsibility for the current state of affairs, that both have committed horrendous crimes in pursuing their aims, and that the real victims of this whole sorry business have been and still are the Kashmiris, whom no-one in over half a century has asked the simple question: "What do you want?" More than anything, I think they'd like to live in peace and enjoy that valley, which is still one of the most beautiful places on earth.

And one day they will, because unless the human race really does go ahead and commit suicide, the great Indian subcontinent, with its population equal to that of China, will have to go back to being what it was in 1947: a unity of diversities. Indians, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis all have the same roots, the same culture and the same history, including the history of the wars they've recently fought against each other, just like the French and the Germans, the Italians and the Austrians. If the continent of Europe has managed to become a community, there's no reason

why the Indian subcontinent can't do so too.

So why not, instead of preparing new massacres, start working immediately towards greater integration, a subcontinent without wars or borders, maybe even with a single currency, or if that's too much to ask, at least a wide-scale, shared commitment to supply everyone with drinking water, given that from Pakistan to India to Bangladesh only a quarter of the population currently has it?

But drinking water is hardly a cause to get excited about. War is much more so. And if this damned conflict between India and Pakistan does indeed escalate and become nuclear, even if by mistake, after all, one mistake leads to another – the death toll would be enormous.

The current India-Pakistan situation clearly shows that a doctrine like the one America is using in support of the international anti-terrorism coalition is preposterous, unjust and downright dangerous. All the reasons the United States has brought forward for bombing Afghanistan and overthrowing the Taliban would now give India equal right to carpet-bomb Pakistan and overthrow the regime of General Musharraf. For years the Indians have been on the receiving end of some horrendous terrorist attacks, the most recent of which was on their parliament on 13 December 2001. There can be no doubt that the terrorist organizations attacking India are based in Pakistan, and there's equal proof that the Pakistani government is granting them asylum. War, then? A just war from India's point of view? No war is just. But there's a problem here: who exactly are the terrorists? Many of those India labels as such are seen by others as freedom fighters. Then there's another problem: unlike the Taliban, who had little in the way of defence to offer against the American superpower, the Pakistanis have modern armed forces and nuclear missiles which are ready and available to be used. A war against them would have unforeseeable consequences.

Washington is therefore now busy trying to calm the two parties down, basically explaining to them that only America

is allowed to pursue its terrorists, that only America can go and flush them out where and when it wants or overthrow governments which are not to their liking. Can you imagine any other country asking them to deliver up to justice one of their citizens who committed terrorist acts in Cuba, Haiti or Chile? Or Washington handing over one of the shady characters responsible for the prolonged terrorist campaigns carried out on America's behalf, say, in Latin America, who now enjoys their protection?

The Americans aren't seeking justice; they're seeking their version of justice. They have no genuine interest in resolving the Kashmiri issue, just as they have no genuine interest in solving the problem of Afghanistan. They entered the region by force to gain their revenge and pursue national interests, and now they're there, they'll stay. The attack on Afghanistan has changed the shape of the world. For the first time in history the United States have gained access to Central and Southern Asia, and they won't let go of it in a hurry. The agreements they've made with the ex-Soviet republics will extend beyond the anti-terrorist state of emergency, and the military base they're building at Jacobabad in Pakistan will be permanent, not least because it will serve to keep an eye on and if necessary wipe out the Pakistani nuclear arsenal, which we all know they see as the "Islamic atom bomb".

India, by committing itself unconditionally and unswervingly to fall in behind the might of America, perhaps in the hope of harnessing that might for its own purposes, has merely strengthened the U.S. presence in the region, and definitively surrendered its stance of being distant and different from the groupings of others. It didn't need to.

India is a poor country, but it still has – and it may well be the last in the world to do so – its own strong, deep-rooted spiritual culture, which is able to withstand the materialistic wave of globalization that steamrollers over identity and everywhere engenders suffocating conformity. This was the moment when India could have sung the praises of diversity, when it could have reminded everyone

that the world needs a coalition against poverty, exploitation and intolerance much more than it does even a coalition against terror. India, sometimes described as "the largest democracy in the world", could have reminded Western democracies that we won't solve our problems by restricting our citizens' freedom, protecting our societies with barbed wire, granting ever more power to repressive organizations and making those who are different feel more and more excluded. It was the moment when India could have spoken up against violence of every kind, even that of the "new world order". This, with its supposedly "global" principles and criteria, which are actually those of the "strong" ex-colonialist countries, merely imposes on India and many other economically underdeveloped and hence "weak" ex-colonies the kind of policy which makes the rich richer, the poor poorer, and both more and more unhappy.

Despite its politicians, India is still a country apart, a country whose society is not moved exclusively by earthly ambitions. Only in India do millions and millions of men and women who have lived normal lives as fathers and mothers, employees or professionals still give up all that is of this world - possessions, ties, desires and name - to become *sanyasis* or renouncers, dressing up in saffron robes, embarking on pilgrimages at an age where we're ready to retire, going round the country from temple to temple, from *ashram* to *ashram*, living off charity. As long as this goes on and the people continue to feed and honour them, India will remain an existential and philosophical alternative to the materialism which dominates the rest of the world today. This is why deep down India remains a line of resistance against globalization, and a bulwark of defence in favour of diversity.

By its very existence, India reminds us Westerners that the whole world doesn't necessarily want what we want or care to be how we care to be. I think back to Afghanistan, and I realize how pertinent this is to that poor country too. The international community, which is rushing in with its cash, its soldiers, its advice and its experts, is most certainly

not the answer for Afghanistan. Indeed, it will only be a new problem if the future of the country turns out to be just a projection of Western fantasies and interests rather than the aspirations of the Afghans, all Afghans.

I left Kabul a fortnight ago to spend the holidays with my family in Delhi, but it's as though my head's still there. In my eyes I still have the stunning view from my two dusty windows, in my ears I still hear the constant buzz of the bazaar, the *muezzins*' call to prayer and the shouts of small boys seeking custom for the taxis as they depart for the ever more dangerous roads of the province. I flick through notebooks crammed full of the stories I heard and the things I thought there. From a distance, it seems more and more obvious to me that what is happening now in Afghanistan, and will continue to do so, is basically to do with diversity, with the right to be different. A century ago, diversity to the Afghans meant gaining independence from colonial oppression, just as it did for the other peoples of the world. Today it means remaining outside a more sophisticated but equally oppressive regime, one which seeks to turn the whole world into a marketplace, and all men into consumers who must first be sold identical desires, then identical products.

Every reconstruction scheme and recovery plan to be financed by international aid in Afghanistan raises one vital question, which no-one seems to have the courage to ask with any conviction: what sort of country is it we're wanting to rebuild? one like ours or one like theirs? The great danger for the Afghans today is that in the euphoria of regaining their freedom to dream, they'll end up dreaming only what we Westerners want them to, and looking on their own history through the eyes of those who are now rewriting it. It's enough just to look at the current version of what has happened in Afghanistan to understand the extent to which it's already riddled with distortions and lies. American war propaganda has planted some of them there on purpose. Others are spontaneous, deriving from the fact that what we call "reality" is what we perceive via our own senses, prejudices and fixed ideas.

One example of this is the image of the Taliban that the Western press has tried to convey. They were horrible, an Islamic version of Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge. They committed hideous crimes against humanity, especially women. They had no popular support, and were little more than foreign occupiers whom the Pakistanis kept in power. The arrival of the Northern Alliance soldiers in Kabul was a genuine liberation. I remember the headline in a major Italian newspaper on 15 November which said: "Kabul: high heels and lipstick". Others told of women who were throwing off their *burqas* or even burning them.

This is obviously a picture which helps justify the conduct of the American war in Afghanistan, their pressing on with raids which continue to cause civilian casualties, and the hunt for Mullah Omar, his ministers and envoys, with which they've got so carried away they've forgotten to explain exactly what "crimes" they're supposed to have committed. But is it an accurate picture? Probably not.

The Taliban regime undoubtedly was arbitrary and repressive, but the Koranic students were hardly pathological assassins. They were the victims as well as the perpetrators of several massacres in the course of the civil war. For example, 3,000 Taliban were captured and killed at Mazar-i-Sharif in 1998. They then did the same to 2,000 Hazaras in the same place a year later by way of retaliation. But unlike in Pol Pot's Cambodia, there were no killing fields in Mullah Omar's Afghanistan, no plans to wipe out part of the population, no attempt to create a "new man" by eliminating the old. The Taliban saw themselves as protectors of the people and as moralizers of Afghan life, which in their eyes had been polluted by a variety of foreign influences. It shouldn't be forgotten that their first public acts in Kandahar in 1994 were to execute a *mujahideen* leader guilty of abducting and raping two young women, and to hang another leader whose offence had been to "marry" a little boy he'd fallen in love with, festoon him with garlands and parade him round on a tank as if it had been a wedding carriage.

Certain Taliban prohibitions, such as the one on flying kites because it took up time the children should have devoted to memorizing the Koran, or rules such as the one about maintaining beards at the "Islamic" length, were clearly absurd. Others less so. For example, anyone discovered watching television or listening to music was sentenced to a week in prison. This had a certain logic to it: Afghanistan didn't produce any tapes or television programmes of its own (at the moment it doesn't even produce matches!), so people could only see or hear material which had been imported, usually from India. This was considered non-Islamic and therefore a potential source of corruption. Their reasoning was not all that different from those in the West who don't want to expose their children to all the ridiculous sex and violence currently shown on television.

One morning when I was in Kabul, I went to the old television station, which had just resumed broadcasting. It was a revelation. The place was in excellent condition. The Taliban hadn't touched it. They'd even continued to pay the technicians' wages so they'd keep the equipment running. It was as if they'd hoped to start it up again one day with programmes of their own. Staff working for the Northern Alliance have got it running again, but people prefer to pick up programmes broadcast by the BBC or those from Pakistan and India.

One of the most ingenious enterprises I saw start up and flourish was using Coca-Cola cans to make satellite dishes. Suddenly they were everywhere. Dozens of old shops that had sold electrical goods and light bulbs were transformed into outlets for television sets and video recorders that had been smuggled in from Pakistan and Iran. The effect was immediate. One day I went out to eat in an old cinema which had been converted into a restaurant, The Khalid. Sadly I noted this newly re-acquired freedom had silenced the nightingales who used to chirp in the cages between the tables. Instead, some heavily bearded regulars were standing goggle-eyed in front of a television on at full

blast, watching a video of a majestic female belly-dancer.

From this point of view, you could say that for Kabul the demise of the Taliban was a minor cause for celebration. The stalls now sell brand new statues of Indian actresses and pirated tapes alongside old city postcards. The owner of a small carpet factory in the Kote Parwal district, where I ended up by chance one day while looking for something else, proudly showed me the recent acquisitions he'd made to make life more pleasant for his workers: two posters of film stars, and a tape recorder which played a little tune over and over again. The workers in a small, cold room were fifteen children, the youngest seven, the eldest sixteen. They worked there eight hours a day, twenty-four days a month for a daily wage of 3,000 *afghani* or 4$, not enough even to buy a *chapati*, which in Kabul costs 4,000 *afghani*. The owner didn't give these children anything to eat or even the occasional hot drink.

"But these are the lucky ones", a humanitarian organization official replied when I told him the story that evening. "They're surviving. For years children have been dying like flies here. In Bamyian, dozens and dozens of children were starving because of the drought and the embargo when the Buddhas were destroyed, yet all the international community was concerned about was what happened to the statues", he said. The destruction of the Buddhas was certainly one of the Taliban's most provocative acts, and it did much to heighten the world's picture of their regime as mad and criminal.

Some of the many crimes attributed to the Taliban include the amputation of alleged thieves' hands and feet, public executions, even the shooting of several women. Certainly these scenes were far from edifying, but they have to be seen in the context of a society which during the civil war had lost all semblance of order, and which began to feel safe again when the *sharia* or Koranic law was strictly re-imposed. Many Kabul inhabitants I spoke to said that no-one was afraid of being robbed while the Taliban were in power, that women could travel from one corner of the

country to the other without threat of being molested, and that the country's roads were safe.

The Western mindset rebels against public executions, but is capital punishment by lethal injection inside an American penitentiary any more civilized? At least under the *sharia* pardon can be granted up to the very last minute if the victim's family forgives the condemned person, unlike in Texas, where George W. Bush rubber-stamped every single death sentence requiring his signature as governor.

The *sharia* has always been the law that governs Afghanistan, and even the constitutions enacted under the various attempts to secularize the country have had to recognize its validity, especially in the spheres of family and property. Many in the West will be surprised to learn that the judges appointed by the new Afghan government have already said that the principles of the *sharia* will have to remain at the heart of the country's new legal system.

As things stand, the law is still that of the rifle. Kabul is full of armed men, and people are still nervous when they see a man with a Kalashnikov before the curfew begins in the evenings: is he a policeman or a thief? Safety conditions are far from good outside the capital either, even in daylight. The country is in the hands of various warlords, each of whom extorts tolls with his armed bands along the roads. The sense of uncertainty caused by this renewed form of banditry, which the Taliban had stamped out by forcibly commandeering a large proportion of all privately-owned weapons, has now been compounded by the risk of American bombs, which could fall at any time and on any part of the country.

At the start of the war, the Americans very generously distributed satellite telephones to tribal chiefs and Afghan leaders who promised to rebel against the Taliban and provide them with any information that could be useful for directing air attacks against Osama bin Laden's and Mullah Omar's men. However, some of these tribal chiefs sent (and are still sending) U.S. bombers to attack their political

adversaries or their rivals' villages, under the pretext that these are hiding the Taliban. This has only served to increase the number of civilians killed "by mistake". One leader with good business acumen used his satellite phone twice in a row to get the Americans to drop him large quantities of food, claiming he was in charge of many people dying of starvation. He wasn't.

Apart from the *sharia*, another issue which has greatly contributed to the Taliban's bad press has been that of the *burqa*. Their imposition of this truly horrific (in our eyes) garment, which covers women from head to foot, has so fired the imagination of the Western world that at one point it seemed as though releasing women from this spectral sack had become one of the aims of the American war in Afghanistan, as though it were a kind of "collateral benefit" to result from their air raids. The impression around the world was that if the Taliban went, so too would the *burqa*. But it wasn't quite like that.

The crowd at the bazaar I saw every day from my two splendid windows over Kabul always wore two colours: the grey-ochre-brown of the men's cloaks, and the grey-blue-navy of hundreds and hundreds of *burqas*. Literally all the women continued to wear it. In the twenty days I stayed in Kabul, I didn't see a single woman in the street with her face uncovered.

This is a point I'll never tire of making. It may seem absurd to us that others don't want to live, eat and dress the same way we do. It may appear ludicrous to us Westerners that any society should prefer polygamy and enforced total fidelity to our temporary monogamy and constant promiscuity. It seems normal to us that a woman should want to be like a man, become a soldier, lawyer or an air pilot and be economically independent, rather than devote herself to rearing and bringing up children and being the mistress of her home.

We like to see the world as we know it, so we can only understand the liberation of Kabul in terms of a liberation

from the *burqa*. If these women don't then throw their *burqas* away, we urge them or even pay them to do so, as one television crew seems to have done.

We forget that the *burqa* belongs to a different world from ours, to a different culture. We forget it has its own tradition, like the *sharia*, and is only one, specifically sartorial aspect of the far more general principle of *purdah*, the tent, which in Islamic society separates women from men in their dwelling places, eating and upbringing. It separates them, but in so doing they believe protects them. For the *burqa* is also protection, a symbol of female unapproachability in a country where it's still customary for village doctors not to touch a female patient, and where only a brother or husband can tell her what's wrong with her. For the same reason, beautiful ivory figures of naked women were carved in China, to be able to indicate the parts of the body causing pain.

In Afghanistan, a little girl doesn't play at being grown up by going round the house in her mother's shoes. She puts on her *burqa* and dreams of the day when she'll be a woman and entitled to one of her own. What would we think if one day our society was taken over by naturists, and we were all forced to celebrate our "release" by suddenly going round stark naked? I know not all Afghan women think the same way, especially those who have studied and travelled abroad, but do the opponents of the *burqa* realize that for the women of the poorest villages it's also a symbol of affluence?

Every traditional society, from India to China, Japan, Turkey and Iran, has had to face the problem of dress when challenged by the West, which has forced them to come to grips with the drama of their own modernization. Solutions have varied from society to society, but the issue has always been far more than one of fashion or liberation. It's a kind of test case between the forces of a past which is seen as having been superseded, and those of a future which is seen as unavoidable. For this is the crux of all that's been happening in Afghanistan for the past century, and it's not

finished yet: a struggle between tradition in the sense of loyalty to the fundamentalist Islamic past, and modernism in the sense of adherence to Western-style secularism.

It's no coincidence that in Afghanistan over the past century and a half, every revolution (including that by the Communists) and every counter-revolution (including that by the Taliban) has touched on the question of the *burqa*. The 1929 rebellion against Amanullah, the Afghan king who even today is remembered with affection, began in response to his decision to remove the veil from women.

King Amanullah's history is interesting, because it's not hard to find parallels with what's happening now. He came to power in 1919 after his father was assassinated, and became a national hero by challenging and defeating the British, who were still claiming to exercise a kind of protectorate over Afghanistan.

Amanullah used this prestige to launch the largest programme of modernization, or rather Westernization, the country had ever seen. He drew up Afghanistan's first constitution, founded its first university, reorganized its legal system, gave women access to education, sent many young Afghans abroad to study, and invited various foreign experts to help the country reform its army and public administration. Then he began to build a new city at Darulaman, to celebrate Afghanistan's entry into the inner circle of the world's sovereign states. At its centre was an enormous building destined to be the Parliament, and a series of fine palaces in European style lining an avenue, which linked this extravagant new Kabul with the old one like a kind of Champs-Elysées.

In a country where Islam prohibited all representation of life, and where images of people and animals were out of the question, King Amanullah built Bernini-style fountains with marble horses and groups. In a country where the norm had always been traditional Islamic, Persian architecture, Amanullah commissioned Western-style monuments including an Arc de Triomphe, a Tomb of the

Unknown Warrior, and a Column of Knowledge and Ignorance. The latter neatly summarized his entire vision of life: knowledge meant modernity, secular and scientific, imported from abroad; ignorance meant local traditionalism, based on religion.

The Europeans were enthusiastic about this Afghan king who was so like them. Together with Queen Soraya, he went on a tour of Europe which proved to be a personal triumph. He was received in various capitals and courts with full honours, and plaudits and pledges of help were piled on him from all sides – rather like what is now happening to Hamid Karzai, head of the new interim government in Kabul.

However, Amanullah's modernity was not so well regarded or received in his own country. The gradual secularization of the state and the erosion of the tribal chiefs' authority, whom the king ordered to appear clean-shaven before a *Loya Jirga* in jacket, trousers and bowler hat instead of their shawls and turbans, transformed the traditionalists' passive resistance into a popular revolt. The photographs of Queen Soraya bare-shouldered in Europe were the final straw. The religious leaders maintained the King's entire programme of reform was anti-Islamic, and that he and the Queen, who had once theatrically removed her *burqa* and trampled on it, had converted to Christianity and become *kaffirs* or infidels. Attempts to suppress the uprising and hanging fifty rebellious chiefs proved fruitless. Amanullah had to beat a hasty retreat from Kabul in his Rolls-Royce, and soon ended up in Italy where King Victor Emanuel, who had made him his "cousin", awarded him the Collar of the Virgin and granted him asylum. He died in Rome in 1960.

His throne passed to a simple peasant who couldn't read or write, "the son of the water carrier". After nine months, he too was toppled and hanged by Amanullah's ex-military chief Nadir Shah, who promised to restore the King, but in the end preferred to seize power himself. Politics is a dangerous occupation in Afghanistan, however. After four years in power Nadir Shah too was assassinated, typically

enough as a son's revenge for the murder of his father, and was succeeded by his son Zahir Shah in 1933. He too has been exiled in Rome for the past thirty years, and the hopes of a national reconciliation now rest on him. If the Bonn agreement is fully implemented, this old man of almost ninety will soon have to preside over a new *Loya Jirga*.

A scene I witnessed one morning in Kabul describes only too well the desperate situation to which the violent struggle between modernizers and traditionalists has brought today's Afghanistan, against the backdrop of the wars against foreign invaders. Guided by a book with photos taken fifty years ago, I had gone to see what remained of Darulaman, the city King Amanullah built. It's awful: mere skeletons of façades, isolated pseudo-Doric columns in a desert of dust and rubble. Much of the destruction occurred between 1992 and 1996, when various groups of *mujahideen* fought each other here. The latest destructions are due to the recent American raids. I was on a bicycle. A small boy was taking me to see a building in which he said a missile had killed 120 Arabs. He made me go carefully, zigzagging between stones painted white and plastic ribbons marking minefields. And there, on this still treacherous stretch of land beaten by wind and sun, a group of peasants was calmly hoeing and furrowing in the midst of rubble, along a wide street that once had been an avenue. Behind them, a horse tied to a plough was turning up clods. They were sowing on Kabul's Champs-Elysées! Life was beginning all over again, from the soil.

A life which, it is good to know, will be dominated by the perpetually unresolved conflict between modernity and tradition, or as Amanullah saw it, between knowledge and ignorance. Unfortunately this is also how the so-called international community sees it, believing it is knowledge come to drive out ignorance, civilization come to drive out savagery. But it isn't like that, and until we understand that the struggle going on in Afghanistan and other parts of the (especially Muslim) world is also a struggle for diversity, it will never go away.

The Taliban may have been obtuse and repressive, they may have reached power on the back of Pakistani economic and military aid, but they were also an Afghan phenomenon, the result of twenty years' war, the product of an ancient history which has peasant roots. The Taliban were not mercenaries in the pay of Islamabad or Osama bin Laden, they were warrior monks, puritans and fanatics, devoted to the mission of saving Afghanistan by imposing a simplistic, primitive and especially restrictive version of Islam on the country. In this they were nothing new, just the reincarnation of that old anti-urban, anti-Western, fundamentally religious traditionalist force against which King Amanullah had fought, and with which all Afghan rulers before and after him have had to contend. This force is represented by the mullahs, the masters or religious leaders who chant prayers in the mosques, and behind whom the whole congregation turns and kneels in the direction of Mecca.

Dressed in black on white, like the words of the Prophet written in black ink on the white paper of the Koran, the mullahs have always wielded considerable power in Afghanistan. They are priests ands healers, judges and masters, also often landowners, and they've always had a decisive role in the life of the nation, especially in the countryside.

It was Mullah Mashk-i-Alam, "Scent of the World", who declared the *jihad* against the British in the nineteenth century. It was Mullah Lang, "the Lame", who directed the uprising against King Amanullah and ended up among those hanged.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the Emir Abdur Rahman had to go and forcibly convert the inhabitants of Kafiristan, the last region of Afghanistan which wasn't yet Muslim, to obtain the mullahs' consent to open the first schools, hospitals and factories (arms factories!) in the country. He didn't convince all of them, and Mullah Mastun in particular, "the Madman", gave him a torrid time.

The legitimacy which Western rulers used to get from God and now get from their people, in Afghanistan has always come from the mullahs. This because the country, despite being divided into various ethnic groups who hate each other, fight each other and take turns to rip each other to shreds, has a common denominator to which all of them have to return: religion, specifically Islam.

My windows over Kabul were an excellent observation post from which to get an idea of the importance of this common denominator. Wherever I looked there was something to remind me of Islam: a minaret, a mosque, the dome of a sanctuary, or the men constantly fingering their rosary beads and habitually stopping to pray. On the square in front of my building where previously a fountain had stood, there was still a strip of concrete where at every hour of the day I saw someone, a policeman, a boy, a soldier or a man selling muscat grapes, engaging in that routine of gestures and genuflections which is also an excellent exercise in concentration and gymnastics.

An endless queue of young and old people were making their way into the shrine of a holy man near to where I was staying, to kiss the green cloth which covered his tomb and hold in both hands the Koran wrapped in a silvery handkerchief. They rubbed their faces with it and buried their noses in it, as if to breathe in its grace, before popping some coins in the offertory box.

Personally, I feel a bit unsettled every time I come to a Muslim country. I'm attracted by the amazing, and to us unfamiliar, sense of male solidarity, but it's also a bit too physical for my liking. I'm also put off by the harshness, the austerity and the basic lack of joy and pleasure which pervades the unadorned mosques, where it seems that absolutely nothing is allowed to distract man from his relationship with his invisible, unapproachable God. A God who lives on no altar, of whom you can't ask anything, in whom you can confide nothing, with whom there's no dialogue and in whose presence you can't even weep, but who still seems to control everything. A disturbing religion,

but it's theirs, the religion of a billion people.

The Taliban's legitimacy comes from here, from this religion and its representatives the mullahs. And it's surely no coincidence that in the eyes of the Afghan masses, the investiture of Mullah Omar as the spiritual as well as the military and political head of the Taliban took place when, at Kandahar in 1994, the young *mujahideen* literally clothed himself with the sacred mantle or *kherka* which is said to have belonged to Mohammed.

In 1768, the Emir of Bokhara presented the *kherka* to Ahmed Shah, the founder of modern Afghanistan and the man who for the first time had managed to unify the country and give it some semblance of being a state. The *kherka* remained in Kabul for some days while it was being brought to Kandahar, where it's now preserved in a specially built mosque. The stone on which it rested is today venerated in a shrine, Ziarat-i-Sakhi, which dominates one of the hills surrounding Kabul, its two little blue domes standing out against the sky. In those days, so the legend goes, the spirit of Mohammed's cousin and brother-in-law Ali came to pay homage to the relic, and the footprint which can be seen in the stone to this day is the sign that he did so.

Perhaps it's because one of the city's largest cemeteries sprawls at the feet of this sanctuary, with its thousands and thousands of simple, unnamed tombstones casting their brief shadows on the ground, or perhaps it's because on the morning I visited it there were very few people there, just some children playing with the flocks of pigeons in the courtyard, that I remember Ziarat-i-Sakhi as being the most peaceful, intense place in Kabul.

And al-Qaeda? What did the people of Kabul know of this organization? What did they know of Osama? Various people I spoke to suggested the name of al-Qaeda was unknown before 11 September, and that only thereafter did Bin Laden's group start to be mentioned in all the foreign local language broadcasts and become part of the common parlance. The Arabs? "The Taliban said they were foreign

mujahideen who had come to help us fight the *jihad* and so were our guests", the people now say. There were quite a lot of Arabs in various parts of Kabul, but they kept themselves to themselves and didn't mix with the Afghan population. They lived their own lives. They weren't popular, and like foreigners in general were viewed with suspicion.

But the fact remains that this word "guest" has a different meaning for the Pashtuns from the one it has for us. Already travellers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries pointed out that *melmastia*, the duty of hospitality according to the Pashtun code of honour or *Pashtunwali*, was such that they even went as far as to risk their own life in order to protect a guest. This is why we shouldn't rule out the possibility that, no matter how absurd it might seem to us Westerners, Mullah Omar, as a Pashtun himself and in his role of "defender of the faith", should view as sacrosanct this dual tribal and religious duty to grant asylum to his guest Osama bin Laden and the foreign *mujahideen*.

It might help to recap their story. When the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in 1979, the Americans saw it as a perfect opportunity to "trap the bear", weaken the Soviet Union and avenge the 50,000 men they lost in the Vietnam war. Moscow had helped the Vietcong and North Vietnamese to humiliate the United States, so Washington would help the Afghans to humiliate and defeat the Soviets. It was a question of finding someone who would fight that war for them alongside the Afghans. Thus the Americans discovered Islamic fundamentalism, not as an enemy but as an ally. Urged on by a propaganda offensive in favour of the *jihad* which the Americans encouraged, thousands of young men from the entire Muslim world volunteered to go and fight the "evil empire", which for their benefit was conveniently portrayed as being fundamentally anti-Islamic. In what it called Operation Cyclone, some 35,000 foreign *mujahideen* were financed, armed, and brought to Afghanistan by the United States.

The war lasted ten years. The Soviets withdrew in 1989 after losing 15,000 soldiers, and the Americans, who had

fufilled their objectives, lost all interest in Afghanistan. They closed their embassy in Kabul, and left those of their foreign *mujahideen* who'd survived the *jihad* to fend for themselves. Thus thousands of Egyptians, Saudis, Yemenites, Algerians, Chechens, Chinese Uighurs and others were left to their own devices.

They couldn't return home, because in the eyes of their governments they weren't *ghazis* or veterans worthy of respect but dangerous revolutionaries who needed to be eliminated. They had nowhere else to go, because no other country was willing to take them in (some of them tried to go back and live in the Arab world, but they were imprisoned immediately and in most cases murdered). They had no alternative but to stay in Afghanistan and sign up with Osama bin Laden. His new *jihad* against the United States, who were "occupying Islam's holy places, helping Israel against the Palestinians and supporting corrupt regimes in the Arab world" struck a chord with those who at that stage were feeling doubly betrayed by Washington. It was thus that al-Qaeda was born and Afghanistan, "the one true Islamic state in the world", as the Taliban called it, became a reference point for all Muslim fundamentalist movements. In a much more limited way and without the training camps, something similar had occurred in the 1920s, when King Amanullah, keen to get back into the mullahs' good books, offered hospitality to large numbers of Muslim fundamentalists from various countries, including British India.

It shouldn't be forgotten that pan-Islamism has Afghan roots, and it's no coincidence either that the tomb of Jamaluddin Afghani, generally thought of as the father of this movement for the unity of the Muslim world, lies at the centre of Kabul University, or rather what's left of it. Afghani, born in 1838, spent most of his life in Persia, Egypt and Turkey. The question which lay at the heart of all his thinking was one which has still to be resolved and which continues to beset Islam today, that is, how to combine religion with modernity.

The solution he proposed involved a selective approach to Western conquests, but first and foremost what he wanted to achieve was the unification of the world's Islamic countries to form a grand caliphate.

Perhaps Osama bin Laden managed to convince Mullah Omar that Afghanistan was that caliphate and their task was to expand it. The relationship between Osama and the spiritual head of the Taliban remains a mystery from our point of view, but it's likely that he had a great influence on Mullah Omar, with his more sophisticated Islamic culture, his extra years, his aristocratic origins and his experience of the world.

And al-Qaeda? It probably wasn't and isn't the homogeneous, centralized organization we are asked to believe. The groups which form part of it, perhaps even only on a very informal basis, have disparate aims and different histories.

Some 329 Taliban prisoners are currently being detained in a Northern Alliance prison which is five hours' drive from Kabul. Two of them are Uighurs. The Uighurs are a race which forms part of the Turkic minority who for centuries has lived in Xinjiang, the westernmost region of China. This is the story of how these two men, aged twenty-two and twenty-five, ended up here.

The Uighurs are discriminated against in China. They aren't even allowed to study in their own language, let alone read the Koran in Arabic. So over the years several families began sending their children to the *madrassas* in Pakistan, a country which has excellent relations with China. For a while everything went well, but then China realized these students were taking a more radical stance, so they asked Pakistan to send them back. Once they'd returned, the persecution started and, according to the two prisoners, 132 of them were executed. The rest, including my two, managed to escape to the only country prepared to grant them asylum, Afghanistan. But even here the Chinese continued to persecute them. The Peking government was

building a new telephone exchange in Kabul, and threatened to withdraw its technicians and aid if the Taliban didn't hand the Uighurs over. The Taliban refused, citing their customary duty of hospitality as they would when they refused to hand over Bin Laden to the Americans. However, they managed to reach a compromise solution with the Chinese, whereby they promised to keep the Uighurs under surveillance and prevent them using Afghan territory for anti-Chinese activities. And so it was: the Uighurs remained to all intents and purposes under house arrest in Kabul, and only when the Americans started the bombings did the Taliban send them off to fight on the front at Kunduz. There my two were captured.

And now? They're waiting for someone to look after them. But who? And where will they go? No one wants them.

The troops of General Dostun, now Deputy Minister of Defence in the new Kabul government, and their American and British advisers, have got round a similar problem by massacring over five hundred prisoners in the fortress at Mazar-i-Sharif.

Maybe the Americans think they can solve the problem of terrorism by killing every seed of the Frankenstein they themselves have created. But they won't be able to do so until they face up to the various problems which, by their different routes, have brought peoples as disparate as the Saudis, the Uighurs, the Chechens and the Algerians to a place such as Afghanistan.

The current anti-terror coalition is just making these problems worse, and increasing intolerance and hatred is undermining the path to any hope of reconciliation between the Chinese and their Muslim minorities, the Russians and the Chechens, the West and the Muslim world in general, let alone any chance of reconciliation between the various Afghan groups.

Kabul today is a city on the alert, a city in which, with the prudence that comes from experience, the people tell their Western interlocutors what they want to hear: that

the Taliban were awful, that American intervention was welcome. It took an old poet of over eighty, a man who no longer has anything to fear and whom I found ill in bed, to write the following lines in Pashtun in my notebook:

In the garden
I gathered at random
grapes and bits of bombs.
Thank you for your gifts,
George Bush.
On the trail of Attila
the bloodbath in Afghanistan
is now warm.

People only open up and begin to say what they really think once you get to know them a bit. They even display a kind of naive nostalgia for the Taliban: hard men but honest, simple and spartan, who ate little and badly, didn't steal and "thought only of Islam and dying". They understand perfectly that those who are currently in power are only there thanks to Americans, who bombed the way to Kabul for them. They know these are the same soldiers who previously destroyed, raped and sacked this city, and they're suspicious.

An Afghan driver with the United Nations once told me he had overheard a conversation shortly after the fall of Kabul between some Northern Alliance soldiers. They were furious, because they'd arrived there hoping to ransack the city – they already had the address of a place they could steal cars from – but were prevented from doing so by their leaders on orders from America.

The people also know that the Taliban are far from finished, that many of them have retreated to their villages and are ready to come back fighting, and that others who were less involved in the worst aspects of the regime are now free in Kabul.

One day I went to talk to some scholars at the Science Academy. As they left the deputy chairman's office, a dusty room with a cast-iron stove but no wood to go in it, and sheets of plastic in the windows rather than panes of glass, six or seven bearded, middle-aged, imposing men wearing turbans and broad brown shawls with green borders tossed over their shoulders, sat waiting to go in. "They're civil servants from the ex-Taliban Ministry for Pilgrimages to Mecca", the man who was accompanying me said as we went down the stairs.

These men struck me as being real Afghans, in touch with the crowd in the market, with the old men who, now the Taliban prohibition has ended, meet up again each day in the winding alleys round the mosque of Puli-i-Khisti to bet on cock-fights, with those I used to watch come and pray on the concrete strip beneath my windows. These Taliban, who never left their country and lived through and took part in every drama there in the past twenty years, struck me as being far more Afghan than the Afghans of the diaspora, the wanderers I saw returning to Kabul after years of exile in the West to offer their (Western) experience to help rebuild the country. Dressed like foreigners in their jackets and trousers, often in raincoats in a city where it rarely rains, a city where nothing at all is familiar to them even though they happened to be born here, they're unmistakable, at times almost pathetic.

One of these expatriates, whose flawless French has already got him a job at the revived Ministry of Culture, gave me one of the few amusing moments I had during my stay in Kabul.

One morning I had joined a few Western diplomats, who had been especially invited by the Minister to inspect the proof of a "crime" that had been committed by the Taliban. The appointment was in front of the Gallery of Modern Art, an old building still in good condition not far from the sanctuary of the King of the Two Swords. The newly-appointed French-speaking junior official was our guide, and he explained to us that the Taliban Minister for the

Protection of Virtue and the Struggle against Vice himself had come here a few months ago to carry out the purge. We went round the four rooms, duly noting the spaces on the walls where the missing works of art had once been, and then, in front of a door sealed with a card bearing the signature of the Minister himself, we waited till one of the attendants managed to find the key.

Eventually a man of about fifty, with a fine henna-red beard, a turban and a brown shawl – was it him? the Minister? – broke the seal and opened the door. On the floor, and already coated in dust, were some twenty paintings of historical scenes with soldiers and horses, and three large canvases with life-size women looking pensive and naked, completely naked, as they dried themselves or looked at their *mons Veneris* in the mirror. Camera flashes were blinding the poor attendants, who were obliged to hold the pictures up high. The French-speaking official was still speaking of this "horrible crime contre la liberté d'expression du peuple Afghan" as a diplomat discovered that we were looking at Afghan copies of early nineteenth-century French paintings, and I creased up laughing.

Among the Afghans of the diaspora who are now returning to Kabul – some of them are already members of the new government – there are also some experienced doctors, engineers and businessmen. But clearly the Afghanistan these people dream of building will just be a copy of the Western countries they've just come from, just as the palaces and fountains Amanullah built were copies. An Afghanistan like this would also please the international community and fit with their interests. But would it be an Afghanistan that is Afghan?

It's now up to the new prime minister Hamid Karzai to strike a balance between these forces. He's a brave, decent man, who's been involved in every stage of his country's recent history and has never put too much distance between himself and his land. His father was killed by the Pakistanis, and he too, at one point foreign minister in the *mujahideen* government, ended up under arrest. The Northern Alliance

imprisoned him, ironically given that he's now their ally and acceptable face. He succeeded in escaping, and managed to reach Quetta in Pakistan. When the Taliban seized power in 1996, Karzai kept up good relations with them, and at one point there was even talk of him becoming their ambassador to the United Nations, had the international community done the obvious thing under international law and decided to recognize their government rather than that of the ousted Northern Alliance.

Karzai's anti-Taliban stance came later on when the regime of Mullah Omar became increasingly radical, perhaps under the growing influence of Osama. Karzai owes a great debt to the Americans. Twice they saved his life when he was on the point of being captured by the Taliban after re-entering the country once the raids had started. The Americans support him, but his being seen as "America's man" doesn't help him, nor does his not being able to ask the Americans to stop bombing the country he's supposed to be running, or being able to decide on what terms or for how long the multinational force can stay in Kabul. Being too much the friend of foreigners is no blessing in Afghanistan.

Everyone says foreigners are now welcome in Afghanistan, but it's not true. Afghan hostility towards all those who pass through their country, especially if uninvited, goes back a long way and has deep roots.

In *Beyond the Khyber Pass*, an American writer's account of his journey through Afghanistan in 1925, the author writes of an Afghan historian who tells him: "You are a foreigner, and you will fill our country with cars and smoke, you will make master and slave alike and will destroy true religion ... not you, my friend, but the destiny you bring with you". That man was no Talib, and you don't need to be one now to think the same way he did. The foreigner in Afghanistan has always been perceived in this light, and those the Afghans have so far seen arrive on one pretext or another, wearing this uniform or that uniform, have all without exception been like this, suspected of wanting to

introduce some unacceptable innovation or guilty of some bloody deed crying out to be avenged.

I witnessed one such act of revenge, albeit in miniature, with my own eyes. I'd gone to have a look at a field hospital the Russians were setting up in Kabul, clearly so they too might have a decent excuse for being in the Afghan capital and keeping an eye on what the Americans were up to. The soldiers from Moscow guarding the entrance are young, penniless conscripts, and they don't say no to the offer of a cigarette. One of them was on the point of lighting up the one he'd just been given by a group of small boys when the Afghan guard standing nearby shouted out: "Stop, stop!". The boys ran away laughing, and the Afghan opened the cigarette paper up. There was gunpowder hidden in with the tobacco.

Episodes such as this make you think that the soldiers of the peace force could also become the target for acts of revenge, if the bombings continue, as time goes on, with their customary number of deaths "by mistake", and the Americans continue to want to capture all the Taliban, irrespective of whether they're commanders, ministers or ambassadors, and carry them off to be interrogated on some offshore ship or at their base in Guantanamo in Cuba to accuse them of goodness knows what crimes. These foreign soldiers who patrol the streets are no different from those who sit in the B-52s as far as the people of Kabul are concerned, not to mention those living in the Afghan countryside where the raids flatten entire villages, destroy fields and alter the very landscape of the mountains by sweeping away their summits. Maybe this is why the British, who were the first to want to come to Afghanistan, now say they want to be out within three months, thereby passing the hot potato on to someone else.

Only if there is reconciliation between the Afghans, only Afghans, all Afghans, those of the Northern Alliance, those returning from exile and also the Taliban, only then will they be able to decide, without too much outside interference and advice, what kind of Afghanistan they'd like to live in.

Only then will they be able to slowly wipe the slate of revenge clean, for at the moment it's clearly anything but. It's going to be a hard, hard task.

One of the great personalities of the last century understood how true this was: Badshah Khan, the "Gandhi of the frontier", the "Muslim soldier of peace". He was an Afghan from the Peshawar region, who joined Gandhi's movement when he was still a young man. He gave his entire life to persuading his people the Pashtuns, one of the most belligerent ethnic groups in the whole world, to renounce violence and give up their ancient code of honour or *badal* which states that it is the duty of all to avenge every deed of blood, even every insult to a tribe, clan or family, with blood. This code has stained the history of Afghanistan for centuries.

Badshah Khan managed to put together an army of over 100,000 men, the "Servants of God" who devoted themselves to non-violence. He led these unarmed soldiers in the anti-British independence movement. An unmistakable figure, strong, with a prominent nose and almost twice the height of the Mahatma, he was at Gandhi's side in all his great battles, the last of which was against the partition of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan. Despite the fact that he was a devout Muslim, he didn't believe in the idea of basing a state on religious exclusivity. Nor did he believe the Pashtuns should accept the Durand Line, that artificial division drawn by British colonialism which left half his race in Pakistan and half in Afghanistan. This is why, before his death in 1988 at the age of ninety-eight, having spent a third of his life in prisons, first British then Pakistani, he signalled his desire to be buried in Jalalabad. Afghanistan was still at the time under Soviet occupation and in the middle of a war, but even on his deathbed he continued to repeat that non-violence was the only possible form of defence and the only way to save the world.

His last message was a straightforward question: "Why do we still produce weapons of mass destruction?". This question has lost none of its relevance today. It is one which

first and foremost should be answered by countries such as the United States, who despite continuing to produce weapons of this kind as well as having huge quantities of them in their arsenals already, is threatening at any moment to attack a country like Iraq, which it suspects of wanting to do exactly the same thing, i.e. produce weapons of its own.

There's only one solution to the problem of weapons of mass destruction: destroy the lot of them, and stop producing new ones. Only then will we be able to prevent any state, rogue or otherwise, from using them. Only then will we be able to prevent any terrorist, Islamic or non-Islamic, from gaining possession of them, as it seems some American citizen still in hiding and as yet unpunished managed to do with spores of anthrax.

Hardly anyone now remembers Badshah Khan and the life he dedicated unsuccessfully to the pursuit of peace. But this is no surprise. Hardly anyone even in India remembers their spiritual master Gandhi, and what that noble soul preached in his life and his death.

India, which Gandhi hoped would become an example of non-violence for the rest of the world and which he thought could be defended without armies but simply by means of *satyagraha*, the strength of truth, now has hundreds and thousands of troops with tanks, artillery, jets and atomic weapons trained against that other half of itself known as Pakistan.

At Rajghat, six kilometres from my home, is a barren plain which the British left completely empty and open when they built New Delhi in case their cannons had to fire on anyone marching on it from old Delhi. It is there that you find Gandhi's *samadhi*, the place intended to honour his memory. I felt the urge to go back there this morning.

There is a large green lawn inside a pink stone enclosure, at the centre of which a flame burns continuously to indicate where the Mahatma was cremated. Everything is neglected and filthy. There are no flowers in the flower beds and no

water in the tiled bowls which line the path. Not even Gandhi or his spirit is here. Although tourists and foreign dignitaries stop off here when they visit India, it's as though this place and all it stands for is no longer fashionable.

Two words stand out on the simple, unadorned black marble dais where someone has thrown a handful of flowers: *Hei ram*, "Oh, God", the words Gandhi uttered when he was hit by his assassin's bullets. It's as if Bapu, the father, were repeating them once more today, now that India has forgotten his example and killed him all over again. *Hei ram.*

LETTER FROM THE HIMALAYAS

What shall we do?

In the Indian Himalayas, 17 January 2002

I like being in a body that's growing old. I can look at the mountains without feeling I have to climb them. When I was young I'd have wanted to conquer them. Now I can let them conquer me. The mountains, like the sea, remind us of a dimension of greatness which can inspire and uplift us. That same greatness is also in each of us, but we find it difficult to recognize. This is why we're attracted to mountains. This is why so many men and women over the centuries have come here to the Himalayas, hoping these heights would reveal the answers that eluded them while they were down in the valley. They still come.

Last winter, an old *sanyasi* dressed in saffron came past my retreat with his disciple, who was also a renouncer. "Where are you going, Maharaj?", I asked him. "In search of God", he replied, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

I come here, as I've done this time, to try to get some kind of order into my head. The impressions of the past months have been very powerful, and I need silence before I set out again, before I go down to the valley once more. Only in this way can one hope to hear the voice that knows, the voice that speaks within us. Maybe it's just the voice of common sense, but it's a voice which is true.

The mountains are always generous. They present me with dawns and sunsets that are unrepeatable. The silence is broken only by the sounds of nature, which makes it seem even more alive.

Life here is simple in the extreme. I write sitting on a wooden floor, my computer powered by a solar panel. I get my water from a spring, which the animals of the woods drink from too, sometimes even a leopard. I cook rice and vegetables over a gas cylinder, and am careful not to throw away the used matches. Everything here is pared to a minimum. Nothing is wasted, and you soon learn to give everything back its original value. Simplicity is a great help when you want to sort things out.

Sometimes I wonder if the sense of frustration and powerlessness which many, especially the young, feel when confronted with the world of today is not due to the fact that it seems so complicated and hard to understand. The only possible reaction is to believe it's the world of someone else, a world you're not allowed to get your hands on or change. And yet it's not true. This is everybody's world.

Faced with the complexity of these inhuman mechanisms operated goodness knows where by goodness knows who, the individual becomes more and more disorientated and feels more and more lost, till he ends up just doing his little job at work, the task he has before him, dissociating himself from all the rest and increasing his sense of isolation and uselessness. This is why I think it's important to bring every problem back to its essentials. If the basic questions are asked, the answers will come more easily.

Do we want to get rid of weapons? Fine. Then let's not get lost in discussions about whether closing down factories which manufacture rifles, munitions, anti-personnel mines or atomic bombs will cause unemployment. Let's resolve the moral issue first. The economic one can come later. Or do we just want to meekly give in to the idea that the economy decides everything, and that all we're interested in is what can make us a profit?

People object that there have always been wars throughout history, so they're hardly likely to stop now. "But why does the same old story have to be repeated? Why not try and start a new one?", Gandhi used to reply to anyone he heard make this tired, clichéd objection.

The idea that man can break with his past and make a qualitative leap in his evolution was common in nineteenth-century Indian thought. The argument is simple: if *homo sapiens*, the current stage in our development, is the product of our having evolved from the apes, why can we not imagine that man will mutate again and turn into a more spiritual being, one who is less attached to the material realm, more committed to his relationship with his neighbours and less rapacious with regard to the rest of the universe?

Seeing that this evolution is bound up with the question of consciousness, why don't we consciously try and take the first step in the right direction? There couldn't be a better time to do so, now that this *homo sapiens* has reached the peak of his might, including his ability to destroy himself with those weapons he so unwisely created.

Let's take a look in the mirror. There can be no doubt that we've made enormous progress in the previous millennia. We've learnt to fly like birds, swim under water like fish, land on the moon and send probes as far as Mars. Now we can even clone life. Yet despite all this, we're not at peace with ourselves or the world around us. We've trampled the earth, polluted rivers and lakes, cut down entire forests and made life hell for the animals, apart from the few we call our friends and pamper till they meet our need of a substitute for human company.

Air, water, earth and fire, which all ancient civilizations saw as the primary elements of life and hence sacred, were once capable of self-regeneration. Not any more, since man succeeded in dominating them and manipulating their power to his own ends. Their sacred unity has been polluted, the balance shattered.

Great material progress has not been matched by great spiritual progress. Quite the opposite. Indeed, from this point of view, perhaps man has never been so poor as since he became so rich. This is why man should now consciously reverse this trend and wrest back control of that most extraordinary tool, his mind. Thus far man has used his mind mostly to understand and take possession of the world outside him, as if this were the sole source of our elusive happiness. Now it's time for him to re-apply his mind to exploring the inner world and the knowledge of the self.

Are these the barmy ideas of some *fakir* on a bed of nails? No, not at all. They're ideas which have been gaining ground in the world for some time now. They've gained ground in the West, where the systems they are meant to be directed against have already swallowed them back up and turned them into the products of an immense alternative market which ranges from yoga classes to meditation courses, from aromatherapy to spiritual vacations for those who are tired of chasing after the hare of material happiness. These ideas are also gaining ground in the Muslim world, torn between tradition and modernity, where the traditional meaning of *jihad* is being rediscovered, not just a holy war against an external enemy but an inner holy war, against man's basest instincts and passions.

Thus we shouldn't just write off the possibility that man can aspire to higher things in the course of his spiritual development. The point is not to continue blindly on in the same direction we're taking at the moment. This direction is madness, as are the wars of Osama bin Laden and George W. Bush. Both of them use the name of God, but their massacres are not any more divine because of it.

So let's call a halt. Let's imagine the present from the point of view of our great-grandchildren. Let's look at today from the perspective of tomorrow, so we don't have to regret having missed an opportunity. The chance we now have is to understand once and for all that the world is one, that every part has its meaning, that it's possible to replace the logic of competition with the ethic of co-existence, that no-

one has a monopoly on anything, that the idea that one civilization can be superior to another is the product of ignorance, that harmony, like beauty, lies in the balance of opposites, and that to eliminate one of these opposites is pure sacrilege. What would day be like without night? or life without death? what would happen to good, if Bush manages to keep his promise and wipe out from the world all evil?

This obsession with reducing everything to uniformity is very Western. Vivekananda, the great Indian mystic, travelled round the United States at the end of the nineteenth century to promote Hinduism, and after one of his lectures in San Francisco, an American lady got up and asked: "Don't you think the world would be more beautiful if there were only one religion for all men?". "No", replied Vivekananda, "maybe it would be even more beautiful if there were as many religions as there are men".

"Empires wax and wane...", begins *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, one of the classics of Chinese literature. Such will be the fate of the American empire too, especially if it seeks to impose itself by the brute force of its now highly sophisticated weapons rather than by spiritual values and the original ideals of its founding fathers.

Two old crows were the first to notice I'd come back to the mountains. Every morning at breakfast time they settle in the deodar, the tree of God, a mighty cedar in front of my house, and caw for all they're worth till I give them the remains of my yoghurt, which I've learnt to make myself, and the last grains of rice in my bowl. I wouldn't be able to forget they're here even if I wanted to. Nor do they let me forget the story the Indians tell their children about crows. A man who was sitting under a tree in his garden, as I am, one day found he could stand the crows' petulant cawing no longer. He summoned his servants, who came and drove them away with stones and sticks. But the Creator, who awoke from his nap at that moment, realized straight away that a voice was missing from the great concert of the universe, and furiously sent one of his assistants to rush down to earth and put the crows back on the deodar.

Here life is lived to the rhythm of nature. There's a strong sense that life is one, that you can't add to or subtract from it with impunity. Everything is linked, every part is the whole.

The Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh puts it very well when he speaks of a table, a little low table like the one I'm writing on now. The table is here because of an infinite chain of events, things and people: the rain which fell on the woods where the tree grows that a woodcutter felled and gave to a carpenter, who put it together with nails made by a blacksmith with iron dug from a mine ... If a single element in this chain hadn't existed, even the great-grandfather of the carpenter, this table wouldn't be here now.

While I was living in Japan, to protect the climate of their islands the Japanese had the bright idea of cutting down not their own forests but those of Indonesia and the Amazon basin. Soon they had to admit that even this would affect them - their actions changed the climate of the whole earth, including that of Japan.

By the same token, we cannot today imagine that we can keep a large part of the world poor while our bit of the globe gets richer and richer. Sooner or later, in one form or another, the bill will be laid at our feet, whether it's man or nature herself who'll bring it to us.

Up here, the impression that nature has a psychic presence of her own is very strong. Sometimes, when I'm all wrapped up against the cold, and I stop everything to go and sit on a ridge nearby and watch the first rays of sun lighting up the peaks of the glaciers, slowly lifting the veil of darkness and revealing chain after chain of other mountains from the milky depths of the valleys, an air of immense joy pervades the world, and I too am caught up in it, along with the trees, the birds and the ants, the same life represented in so many different magnificent forms.

It's feeling cut off from all this that makes us unhappy, as does feeling cut off from our fellow men. "War doesn't only break men's bones, it also breaks their human

relationships", the dynamic Gino Strada said to me in Kabul. To mend these relations, as well as the physical gashes he mends in the emergency hospital, Strada has a ward where young Taliban soldiers lie just a step or two away from their enemies from the Northern Alliance. The Taliban are prisoners and the Northern Alliance soldiers are not, but Strada hopes that their common mutilations and similar wounds will help bring them together.

Dialogue is an enormous help in resolving conflicts. Hatred only nurtures more hatred. A Palestinian sniper kills an Israeli woman in a car, the Israelis react by killing two Palestinians, a Palestinian swathes himself in dynamite and blows himself and a dozen young Israelis up in a pizza restaurant, the Israelis send a helicopter to bomb a bus full of Palestinians, the Palestinians ... need I go on? How long will it all continue? until there are no Palestinians or Israelis left? until all the bombs are finished?

Certainly there are reasons for every conflict, and these have to be addressed. But it will all be useless unless one party acknowledges the other's existence and recognizes they are equal, until we all accept that violence only ever leads to more violence.

"Fine words. But what can we do?", I hear someone say, even through the silence. Every one of us can do something. Together we can do thousands of things.

The war against terrorism is being used today to militarize our society, to produce new weapons and increase defence spending. Let's oppose this, and refuse to vote for anyone who's behind such policies. Let's check where we've invested our savings, and withdraw them from any company that's even remotely linked to the arms industry. Let's say what we know and feel to be the truth, that killing under all circumstances is murder.

Let's talk about peace, and introduce a culture of peace into our children's education. Why should we always teach history as if it were an unending sequence of wars and massacres?

With all my Western studies, I had to come to Asia before I discovered Ashoka, one of the most extraordinary characters in antiquity. Ashoka lived three centuries before Christ, and at the peak of his power, after he'd added yet another kingdom to his already vast empire extending from India to Central Asia, he realized that violence was absurd, decided the greatest victory of all was that of conquering men's hearts, renounced war, and had his new ethic carved in stone in each of the numerous languages which were spoken in his territories at the time. One of Ashoka's memorial stones inscribed in Greek and Aramaic was discovered in 1958 at Kandahar, the spiritual home of Mullah Omar where the U.S. marines are now camped out. Another one stands at the entrance to the National Museum in Delhi; Ashoka announces in it the opening of two hospitals: one for humans and one for animals.

The causes of war are to be found within us, more than they are outside us. They are to be found in passions such as desire, fear, insecurity, greed and vanity. Gradually we have to rid ourselves of them. We need a change of attitude. Decisions which affect us and others, let's make them on the basis of a bit more morality and a bit less self-interest. Let's do more of what is right, and less of what's just convenient. And let's bring our children up to be honest rather than crafty.

Let's restore certain traditions of good behaviour, even to the point of reclaiming our language from the kind of talk where the word "God" has become a kind of obscenity. Let's go back to talking about "making love" rather than "having sex". Even this will make a big difference in the long run.

It's time to move out into the open, time to make a stand for the values we believe in. A society gains much more strength by its moral resolution than it does by acquiring new weapons.

Above all, let's stop, take time to think, hold our tongues. Often we feel tormented by the life we lead, like the man

who flees in terror from his own shadow and the echoes of his own footsteps. The more he runs, the more his shadow seems to stalk him, the more he hears his own footsteps clatter, the more he is frightened. Until he stops and sits in the shade of a tree. Let's do the same.

Viewed from the perspective of the future, these are days in which it's still possible to do something. So let's do it, sometimes on our own, sometimes all together. It's an opportunity.

The road is a long one, and in parts still to be invented. But would we rather take the path of brutalization which lies before us, or the even quicker one which leads straight to our extinction?

So have a good journey – inside as well as out!

"Terzani declares peace on war and war on American thinking"

International Herald Tribune, 11th of April 2002

"Terzani attempts the difficult operation of forcing the West at war to think it over. He suggests that the only way to stop terrorism is not by killing terrorists, but by eliminating the reasons that turn a man or a woman into a terrorist"

L'Espresso, Rome February 2002

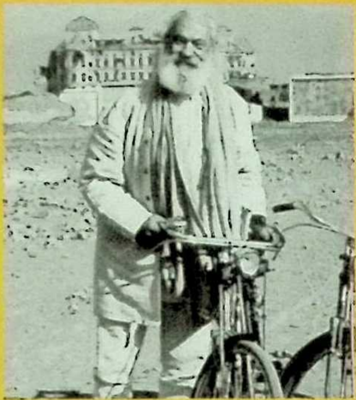
"This is the cry of an honest man who in Afghanistan hasn't seen yet another war in his long career, but the West at its dead end"

Il Corriere della Sera, Milan, February 2002

"The causes of war are to be found within us, more than they are outside us. They are to be found in passions such as desire, fear, insecurity, greed and vanity. Gradually we have to rid ourselves of them. On the 11th of September the world has changed. Now we ourselves have to change.

It's time to move into the open, time to make a stand for the values we believe in. A society gains much more strength by its moral resolution than it does by acquiring new weapons".

"...India is home. I've lived here for years. It's here that I keep my books, that I find the refuge a man seeks from the world's hustle and bustle. Here, as nowhere else, I get a sense of the senseless flowing of life. But now even India is a disappointment. Even India talks only of war, mobilizes troops and artillery...and happily wags its tail behind the American military bandwagon. A country of a billion people! The country which owes its independence to Gandhi, the Mahatma, the noble soul, today a country just like any other. What a pity."



Tiziano Terzani, born in Florence, Italy, was for 30 years Asia correspondent of the German magazine *Der Spiegel*. As such he was based in Vietnam, Hong Kong, China, Japan and Thailand. Since 1994 he lives in India, now mostly in the Himalayas. He has written various books. In English recently appeared *The Forbidden Door, Good Night, Mister Lenin* and *A Fortune teller told me.*
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After 30 years as a war correspondent for a major European magazine, Tiziano Terzani turns into a correspondent against all wars.

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